

# on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic



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Ann **Marston** Harry James **Connolly** Charles Coleman **Finlay**  
Jean-Claude **Dunyach** Randy D. **Ashburn** Steve **Mohn**  
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*"I just wish you would turn your talents to real literature, because I would never read this if it was published as sci-fi. I just don't read That Kind Of Thing."*

## Editorial: **That kind of thing**

Holly Phillips, Fiction Editor

I HAVE A FRIEND—A DEAR, INTELLIGENT, COMPASSIONATE friend—who cannot stand the fact that I write SF. Every time she reads a story of mine, she praises the writing extravagantly and then says something like, "I just wish you would turn your talents to real literature, because I would never read this if it was published as sci-fi. I just don't read That Kind Of Thing." Never mind the temptation to complain about the ghettoization of speculative literature. How about the temptation to bonk her over the head with a handy piece of furniture?

But forget the ghetto for once. We've all read one of those rants, and anyway I want to chase a different hare: a big and bounding Why. Not Why do I write SF, because that's an easy one. It's fun and I love it. The Why is one that occurred to me the last time my friend told me I should write literature. Why, when you get right down to it, don't I?

Except that—just to confuse the issue—I occasionally do. Not long ago I found myself working on what I still think of as the Cinderella-meets-the-Pied-Piper story, even though any fantastical elements fell out before I got to page three. This is how I usually wind up writing non-SF stories. If

I conceive of an idea for a character or a dramatic situation, for example, that doesn't have anything speculative, fantastical or horrific implicit from the get-go, it gets jotted down in the notebook and waits until I can flesh it out with something funky and/or nasty. And when the speculative element in an originating idea turns out not to be integral, as happened with the above story, I tend to think of it as a "failed" attempt—even this one, which has lots of tension and a pleasantly ambiguous ending.

It is this notion of failure that I find really interesting. After all, lots of my favorite authors write enthralling stories based on nothing but the "real" world. I put *real* in quotation marks because, as one of my more enlightened friends points out, there is a level at which all fiction is speculative. Consider the idea of using an inanimate object to export the contents of an imaginary person's head into the head of a third person you've never met. Science fiction plot? Nope. Just another day in a literary writer's life. And mainstream literature has much more to offer. To pick an example not at all at random, Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* is a fascinating exploration of the relationship between narrative structure and subject matter. It would be a good read for that reason alone. So why do such "real-world" ideas seem flat and uninteresting to me when they wander into my mind?

Well, to start with, *The Blind Assassin* is a lousy example to use, because of the classic pulp sci-fi story woven into the narration. I could write a whole essay on that sub-narration (it's not exactly a sub-plot) alone. But the book is also an excellent example because it is, among other things, a lesson in how speculative elements can work as metaphorical illustrations of the theme, characters, and even plot of a story, while *at the same time* standing on their own two feet as revelatory, exciting, frightening, instructive, intriguing, amusing, mind-expanding exercises in imagination.

And *imagination* is what SF is all about. Imagination is the door that opens onto a whole new dimension of storytelling. *Yes*, the use of language is essential. *Yes*, the tools of narration should be employed in all their various strengths. *Yes*, plot, character, theme are the indispensable organs of story. But honestly, when it comes right down to it—

Why should I write in three dimensions when I can write in four? •

# In the news

We are pleased to announce the winner of our 2001 Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize is E.L. CHEN, who had two stories published in *On Spec* last year, "Two Certainties" (Spring 2001) and "The Gate of Heavenly Peace" (Fall 2001). Currently co-editing SF Canada's newsletter, *Communiqué*, Elaine continues to impress us with the depth and skill of her writing. We featured her story "The Prodigious Daughter" in our Spring 2002 issue, and will run "More Than Salt" in our upcoming theme issue this year as well. Congratulations!

Congratulations as well to ROBERT H. BEER ("Waking the Dead," *On Spec* Fall 2001) and DOUGLAS SMITH ("The Red Bird," *On Spec* Summer 2001) for their Aurora Award nominations for Best Short-Form Work in English.

We are especially proud that PETER WATTS, one of our fiction editors, is on the Aurora ballot as well. Peter's novel *Maelstrom* has been nominated for Best Long-Form Work in English. *On Spec* itself is on the short list for an Aurora for Best Achievement in English (Other).

Winners will be announced at the Aurora Award banquet at CanVention/ConVersion/ConSpec in Calgary on August 10. Deadline for voting is July 31, 2002. •

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*Evolution takes forever, but the new ecology, the urban ecology, has gaps that need to be filled now...*

# The New Ecology

Holly Phillips

IT WAS ALMOST QUITTING TIME WHEN MILLENNIUM SAW THE Nerd again, lurking outside the donut shop in his car. She went straight home to the boarding house and packed her bags.

Sonia from down the hall leaned in the doorway, a newspaper in her hands. "So, what is it? Cops? Debt collectors? Ex-boyfriend?"

Jeans, underwear, T-shirts. "More like Lectroids from Planet Ten." Bike shorts and helmet.

"Huh?"

"Forget it." She tossed the duffel to land with a thump by Sonia's bare feet.

"Hey, watch it."

"Sorry." She zipped up the sleeping bag on the bed, folded it in half and started to roll.

"Well, I don't blame you for leaving, whatever it is," Sonia said, rattling the newspaper. "It's getting pretty weird around here. Did you hear about this thing at the park by the aquatic center? Seems some crazy welder or someone turned the jungle gym into kind of a real jungle—or anyway, a plant, like one of those fly-eating plants, what are they called, Venus fly-traps? They say some kid went to play on it and almost got trapped inside."



Serves her right if you ask me; you got to be pretty dumb to play around on a thing like that, but can you imagine the amount of work..."

Millennium stopped listening. The sleeping bag's frayed strings were too short, and anyway, she already knew more than the paper did about the kid-eating jungle gym. It wasn't until she heard Sonia say something about their landlord that she tuned back in.

"What?"

"I said, does Mr. Chang know you're leaving?"

Shit. She tossed the bed roll by her duffel bag and looked around the room to see if she'd forgotten anything. "Not yet," she said. "I'll call him from the bus station."

ONCE SHE'D BOUGHT HER TICKET SHE USED A PAY PHONE TO MAKE TWO CALLS. THE first one was to Mr. Chang.

"Moving out? You mean October first, right?"

"No, I mean five minutes ago." He started to sputter. "Hey, be glad I'm paid up to the end of September."

"One month's notice, or one month's rent!"

"Kiss my ass."

The second one was to her folks, collect.

*Press one to accept the charges.*

Beep.

"Millie?" Half worry, half hope. "Where are you?"

"Kelowna, Mom." A beat to let the relief/disappointment set in. Then, "But I'm moving to Vancouver."

"Oh, Millie."

"It's Em, Mom, remember?"

"I thought you liked it there."

"Yeah, well, not really."

"You said you didn't want to go back to the coast after what happened in Victoria."

"I'm kinda running out of places to go, Mom." She knew it was a mistake even as she said it.

"You could always come home, Em."

She winced. "You don't want that, Mom. Trust me. You really don't want me home."

"Oh, honey, of course—"

"It's getting worse, Mom." She hadn't meant to say that either. Her throat started to close. "They're getting stronger. And there's some guy following me around."

Hiss of a long distance line. Finally, "Millie. Come home. We can always

find a way to manage.”

“You know I can’t.” She pressed her knuckles hard against her mouth, pain to kill the betraying quaver. “It’s better if I keep moving, Mom. I’ll be fine. I’ll call you when I have a place to stay.” Before she hung up, she added, “Give my love to Dad.”

WHAT WITH THE ONES GETTING THEMSELVES INTO THE PAPER AGAIN, SHE’D ALREADY been thinking about leaving, even before she saw the Nerd. She had picked Kelowna to begin with because it was a new city with a fast urban sprawl gulping up the farms and sage brush that had once filled the Okanagan Valley. A city too new to have awoken to its power of creation yet—that’s what she’d hoped for. Instead it seemed to be working the other way around. The city Ones were far livelier than she’d anticipated, adapting with an ingenuity that was half thrilling, half terrifying: witness the jungle gym. Still, she might have stuck it out at least until winter, when things usually quieted down, if *he* hadn’t found her again.

The Nerd.

A bulky shape behind the wheel of a rusted-out Civic, a face red and shiny in the heat, a plump hand pushing heavy glasses up his nose as he sat reading a book and waiting for her to show.

Nemesis in coke-bottle lenses.

She had to laugh, even as the fear tightened its coil in her gut.

VANCOUVER

September was a good time for finding work. She moved into a cheap room in a house off Commercial Drive, and by the end of her second day she had a job riding for a courier service downtown. It was Indian Summer time, warm sunshine with a cool wind off the harbor. Even with the smog trapped by the mountains east of the city, the riding was a pleasure, especially after the baked heat of August in Kelowna, and the Vancouver traffic was a thrill, pure distraction from 9 to 5. The rest of the time she waited for the city Ones to know she was there.

She didn’t have to wait for long.

The Small Ones found her first, as they usually did. Her fourth night in the attic room that smelled of curry and mold, she heard the scritch of metal claws on the walls outside. Lying on the sagging bed, sleeping bag open to her waist, she turned her head toward the small window across the room. Her skin tightened, trying to lift the hairs on her arms. Her breath came short. She’d never get used to it. *Scritch, scrabble scratch.* Never. A moving gleam showed in the window, a leggy shadow against the streetlight. There was no curtain or blind. *Scritch ... tap tap tap.*

Bold fucker. She sat up.

Flash, swirl of legs and out of sight. Scrabble scritch and the patter of stucco on the rhododendron two stories below. Not that bold.

Yet.

BY HER SECOND WEEKEND IN TOWN SHE KNEW IT WAS A MISTAKE TO LIVE SO NEAR Commercial Drive. Though it was showing signs of the money creeping east through the city, the Drive was still a funky blend of radicals and free spirits, granola and grunge: city life growing wild outside the sober structure of the business center. Too lively in every sense of the word.

By Saturday night, she was unable to sit quietly waiting at home. The air was warm and dry, the smell of summer pavements still strong under the smells of coffee and garbage. Trolley buses whirled by, their cables snapping sparks like the city's neural network there for anyone to read if they could. It was more than Millennium could do—more than she wanted to. But she had other senses and she knew the city was aware of her, watching her as surely as the shaved boy on the corner with steel piercing his lip.

"Spare a quarter? Spare a loon?"

Millennium shook her head and walked on. At least out here with the people and the streetlights all around her, the Small Ones could only watch from hiding. But she had to go home eventually, and when she did, they were waiting.

The house was dark, the other inhabitants either asleep or still out. Oversized rhododendrons made black heaps at the edges of the shaggy lawn. A windless night, but leaves and dry grass rustled as she walked to the front door. More than that, there was the sense of eyes, many eyes, down low and watching.

She meant to go in, daring them to risk the inhabited house, but they came out before she could even get the key in the lock. Rustle and the patter of tiny feet. She spun, put her back to the door. A streetlight lit the lawn like a three-in-the-morning stage.

First came a creature the size of a pug dog, a thing of segmented legs that threw themselves over as much as they scuttled forward, like a spider caught in surf. A junkyard spider: the dim light gleamed off the twisted tin of its limbs, the tarry rags of its joints. It scuttle-tumbled to the edge of the walk between the street and the house and stopped with its legs bunched under, ready to pounce. A pause, in which Millennium heard her heart beating loud. Then another came, and then a handful more.

Scrapyard, trash heap, back alley beings. There was, despite the aggravation, something touching in their shyness. They were like children left

too soon alone, torn between vengeful pranks and the desire to please, wanting attention and fearing it. A cautious slither of wire and springs to the left, a hesitant leap-frog bound of old shock absorbers and bicycle tires to the right, the eerie two-legged stalk of stick figures made from rebar and broken cement: the detritus of the city, gathered on Millennium's lawn. After a pause, they began to dance.

One of the harmless times. Relieved, resigned, she sat on the step to watch.

Young, half-formed and awkward, the Small Ones danced like mariottes with half their strings cut—and resented their own clumsiness, or so it seemed. One of the rebar stickmen fell over the tumble spider, and when it climbed to its feet, it sent the spider rolling with a stiff-legged kick. The shock absorber frog didn't understand the figure at all and bounced about at random until the others shoved it to the periphery. In fact, the whole mood of the dance was more determined than celebratory, as if they were fulfilling an order to dance even though they weren't very good at it, and knew they weren't, and would rather be doing something else. Of course, they had no music beyond the throb of car speakers and the whine of buses on the Drive.

Millennium put her chin in her hands and asked them wearily, pointlessly, "What do you want from me?"

She had never known why they chose her, nor what they needed her for. Maybe for an idol, if it was a kind of worship to drive her half mad with irritation and fear, or maybe a model of how to live in the world—but sometimes she thought she was no more, and no less, than their audience, the observer that proved their existence was real.

And sometimes—more and more often in recent years—she just plain didn't care.

Her question was ignored, of course. Two of the rebar stickmen collided and began to fight, stiff arms and legs beating against each other with a racket of steel bars banging. The tumble spider tried to intervene and was kicked into the wire snake, which tangled its legs. The shock absorber frog bounced excitedly in place. A voice from the sidewalk said, "Wha' the fuck?"

Like cockroaches surprised by light, the Small Ones leapt up and were gone.

The owner of the voice, one of Millennium's housemates, said, "What the fuck..."

Caught out and thinking fast, Millennium cleared her throat and said, "Raccoons. Baby raccoons. Playing. You scared them away."

Her housemate shambled hesitantly up the walk. He was tall, thin,



named Dave, and, luckily, drunk. "Raccoons? They didn't look... Is that Paula?"

"No, Em."

"Oh, hi, Em. I don't think those were raccoons."

"Sure," she said flatly. "I've been sitting here half an hour watching them. What else would they be?"

"Hum," he said, thoughtful. He stood swaying there a moment, then yawned. "Shit, am I bagged."

Millennium got up and pulled out her key.

Tired, she nevertheless stayed awake staring at the lines of streetlight on her ceiling. The Small Ones would be angry at the interruption. If they were angry enough, they might wake one of the Larger Ones. She lay in a cold sweat, waiting, but the rest of the night was as quiet as it ever was that near the Drive. When she went down at noon, she found the rest of the household speculating about the vandals that had taken all the doors and the front hood off of Paula's car and left them lying neatly on the lawn. The neighbors to either side had suffered similarly. Someone called the cops. On Monday, an opinion piece about imaginative hooliganism on the Drive appeared in the *Province*.

Two days later, Millennium, riding home from the supermarket on Broadway, saw the Nerd sitting in a cafe window, scribbling in a book.

SHE SPENT THE NIGHT IN A SEETHING TANGLE OF FURY AND FEAR. BAD ENOUGH TO be stalked by a geek, but at a level she couldn't articulate, she knew that what he wanted from her was not her body, not *her* being, but the beings that gathered to her wherever she went. When she went to get her bike from the back porch in the morning, she found they had garlanded it with a tangle of unspooled audio tape. Gift, prank, or commentary on her situation—who knew? She stripped the shiny black stuff away and said between her teeth, "Enough." She knew of no way to get the Small Ones to leave her alone.

But the Nerd... the Nerd was something else.

OF COURSE, WHEN SHE WANTED TO SEE HIM, HE WAS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND. Three times over the course of the week she thought she glimpsed his soft pear shape waddling down the Drive or overflowing a coffee shop chair, but every time, it turned out to be a stranger. His absence began to seem as irritating as his presence had been. And the Small Ones were active as well, almost as active as the Ones in Kelowna. Maybe, she was starting to think, maybe that activity hadn't been so much the place as

the time. Maybe the Ones everywhere were coming more alive, creating more of their own. How long, she thought one night, before her secret was no longer hers alone to keep, or even a secret at all?

When she saw him at last the next evening, staring myopically at the posters on the Chinese theater's door, she jumped her bike onto the sidewalk and braked at his back.

"Hey, asshole."

He spun, off balance, and gaped. Blue eyes made huge by the glasses, a little nose, a rosebud of a mouth. Thinning hair, though he couldn't have been that much older than she.

"You have something to say to me?" Millennium asked him, voice hard.

"Do I know you?" he said. His voice was right, but he spoiled it by shoving at his glasses while his magnified eyes blinked.

"No, you don't," Millennium replied, showing her teeth. "Which is why I wonder how come I keep seeing you. First Edmonton, then Kelowna, now here. So what's up?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, and squeezed past her onto the sidewalk.

She spun her bike and pushed off at his side. "Oh, come on. You've got my attention, isn't that what you wanted? Or did you really think I hadn't noticed?"

He ducked his head, clutched his notebook, and scurried, jiggling. "I think you think I'm someone else. I've never seen you before. Leave me alone!"

Other pedestrians were glaring at her for having her bike on the sidewalk.

"Aw, come on. Aren't you even going to ask me out?"

The Broadway skytrain station was in sight. He gulped, shoved at his glasses and broke into a run. The sight of his fat bum bobbing down the sidewalk made her laugh. A knot of people waiting for a bus cut her off. She deked out into the street, pissed off a bus driver, jumped the curb again at his side.

"Hey, asshole," she said.

He stared at her, blinking. For a split second she thought she had it wrong, that he was the wrong guy, or it was all some weird coincidence. But past thick lenses and flickering eyelids, the blue eyes watched. *Watched*. Yeah, he knew who she was all right.

"Well, if you're not gonna give me a date," she said softly, grinning with rage, "how about a present?"

Before he could react, she snatched the notebook from under his

arm and dove into the traffic. Rush hour on Broadway. He didn't have a chance.

GUILT ALMOST CAUGHT UP WITH HER AS SHE WOUND HER WAY HOME. BUT ONCE IN her room, still sticky with sweat, she opened his notebook and the guilt blew off her like dust. Outside, a blue spiral-bound book, the cover bent, peeling, and stained by coffee cup rings. Inside, Millennium's life.

A yellowing newspaper article was taped to the first page. *Agricultural Vandalism* said the headline. It was a short column from the back page of a small town Ontario paper. She knew the town, and the story, and the events of which it spoke.

*London, ON. A new kind of vandalism has struck London's farming communities this week, resulting in thousands of dollars in damage.*

ONE SENTENCE, AND MEMORY CAST HER BACK.

It had been a strange, restless night and she had awoken early in her room across the hall from her parents. Her window looked out through the branches of an old pear tree to the green expanse of the canola fields. She glanced out to check the weather and saw the line of humped earth like a mole's burrow magnified a thousand-fold, leading to a huge black mound in the far corner of the field. She heard her father stirring in his room as she slipped out of the house and ran barefoot across the soft young growth.

*For the last several nights someone has been turning farmers' agricultural equipment into works of "art," doing irreparable damage in the process. "I'm actually kind of impressed," said John Goodman, the farmer most affected. "Whoever's doing this is very creative." Goodman's neighbors are not so philosophical.*

MILLENNIUM COULD REMEMBER HOW HE LAUGHED WHEN HE SAW THE SPIKY hedgehog-mole creature his harrow had become. He hadn't understood—and she couldn't explain—either her terror or her guilt. The pranksters, the invisible friends who'd been transforming her toys and playing jokes on her since childhood, were getting out of hand. Way, way out of hand.

Written in blue ink underneath the article, in a tiny exacting script: *Millie (Millennium!) Goodman, 16 yrs old. First occurrence on record, but probably not really the first.*



IT WAS NEARLY DARK. SHE PUT THE LIGHT ON, GOT A DRINK OF WATER, PACED. ALL she wanted to do was burn the book and flush the ashes down the john. But eventually she sat down again and turned the page.

### ***Agricultural Vandals Turn Dangerous***

*London, ON. Pranksters who have been vandalizing farmers' agricultural equipment are prime suspects in an assault case, police said today. Last night local farmer John Goodman, whose farm has been the main targets of the vandals, was seriously injured in a bizarre attack.*

The memories came, vivid and confused. Her father's steps, late, on the stairs. Creeping after him in her pajamas; listening at the kitchen door to the snick-snapping and metallic groans from beyond the barn. Hearing her father's shout—then his scream—then running, running...

*Mr. Goodman interrupted his assailants and they attacked him with the harvester they were vandalizing, police said. His youngest daughter heard the assault and scared them off.*

There was no "them," no one there at all except for Millennium and her father. No one, unless you counted the combine harvester, alive, deranged, tying itself in knots, a being trying to birth itself out of its own inanimate body. It scarcely even knew her father was there, but it knew her. It knew her.

*Millie Goodman, 16, was too upset to talk to police, Constable Griffon said. "We hope when she calms down she'll be able to give us a description of the perpetrators. This was a very serious assault."*

And on the facing page, with her high school photograph at the side:

### ***LOCAL GIRL MISSING***

*London, ON. Local girl Millie (Millennium) Goodman, 16, has been listed as a missing person. She was last seen three days ago in the London hospital where her father, John Goodman, is recovering from an assault suffered on his farm outside of London.*

*When asked whether Ms. Goodman's disappearance could indicate involvement in her father's assault, an Ontario Provincial Police spokesperson said, "That's one possibility that must be considered." Ms. Goodman is a key witness in the case.*

AND IT WENT ON FROM THERE. HEADLINES FROM THE BACK PAGES OF NEWSPAPERS IN Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa, and then progressively west: Winnipeg, Calgary, Victoria. Edmonton, Kelowna, and finally Vancouver. Some of



the articles were grainy photocopies, as though the Nerd had found them in libraries; some of them were on glossy fax paper; some had nothing to do with the Ones. But most of their acts were documented in the Nerd's book, the times their play had come to public attention: the car snares on the 401 outside of Toronto, the park bench alligators in the Rideau Canal, and on, and on.

And although Millennium's name never appeared in the news after London, in city after city, that tiny blue writing made note of her address, where she worked, how long she stayed. There was a blurry Polaroid taped on the same page as the Winnipeg incident, her on her bike in a yellow slicker. That was when he must have found her, she thought. That was when the addresses started to appear, and other pictures. Her on her bike. Her shopping for groceries. Her drinking coffee by the kitchen window of the apartment in Edmonton.

Her stomach heaved.

She barely made it to the bathroom in time.

MIDNIGHT, AND THE SMALL ONES WERE DANCING ON THE ROOF.

She heard them, their hard feet like hail beneath the rain that had finally come, and somewhere in the dark space between that awareness and her rage, a plan began to form. She showered and dressed, and switched off the light.

And then she opened the dormer window. Heart beating hard enough to shake her bones, she called softly into the night, "Hello? Hey, you guys. Come down here for a second."

Silence fell with the rain.

"Hello? I need—" A breath. "I need to ask a favor."

A deeper silence yet.

Then the scrape of metal claws on the eaves.

THE MISTY NIGHT RAIN CLEANED THE AIR AND COOLED MILLENNIUM'S FACE AS SHE jogged down the alley on the Small One's trail. She could feel every block of that day's ride burning in her thighs, but she didn't want to lose the tumble spider leading her on this chase. It was hard enough to see already, half a block ahead and looking like so much trash blown by a nonexistent wind. She almost missed it when it scabbled up a wooden fence and fell into someone's backyard. She hesitated, wondering if this was just another prank. It was crazy to try this, crazy to think the Ones could ever be anything but a nuisance and a terror.

But then, her whole life was crazy. And what if—she couldn't help the lance of excitement in her gut—what if it worked? What if they learned

to take her commands?

She put her hands on the top of the fence, jumped with legs strong from riding, and hopped over. The Small One was waiting on the other side.

Through a side yard, across an empty street, through a gap in a plywood fence that tore her jeans but let her through. Around the edge of a construction pit black with shadow where *something* stirred. The Small One skittered lightly by, a tin can tumbleweed in the dark. Millennium followed on her toes, breath locked in her throat. The *something* was big, one of the Largest Ones, but only half awake. She wished it sleep and crept by, silently cursing her guide. Under the fence through a ditch of wet weeds, across the street, another side yard. The Small One disappeared into the shadow of a house, and didn't come out again.

Millennium hunkered down in the damp shelter of a hydrangea. "Hey," she whispered. There was no streetlight near, but a window on the second floor showed a glow behind a thin blue blind. Otherwise the darkness was almost perfect. Rain hushed in the leaves, a car hissed by on the street. Then something moved on the lighted window's sill. The Small One raised a twisted limb and knocked on the glass.

A minute passed. Millennium realized she was clutching handfuls of wet grass in her tension. She let go, wiped her hands on her jeans. The Small One tapped again. This time, a shadow moved behind the blind. A hand appeared, then the blue paper scrolled up to reveal a familiar bulbous bulk. The tumble spider slipped aside to cling to the wall. Millennium wiped her hands again and stepped into the light from the Nerd's window.

Another minute. The tumble spider waved a few legs in the air like a sea anemone groping after a meal. It was eerie even to Millennium, who had sent it. The Nerd pulled up the window's sash and bent to stick his head out into the rain. The Small One reached two legs pincer-like within a few inches of his ear. He stared down at Millennium.

"What do you want?" he whispered like a shrill hiss of steam.

"I want to talk to you," Millennium said. She spoke aloud, calmly, admitting no doubts.

The Small One reached an inch closer. "I don't know you," the Nerd hissed, oblivious. "Leave me alone."

"That's a good one," Millennium replied. "I bet the cops'll get a laugh out of that when I show them your book. What do you think? A guy who stalks somebody across half the country. You think I should go to the Vancouver cops or the RCMP?"

From the Nerd, nothing. The tumble spider deftly twirled to bring

another leg into range. Let him turn his head, Millennium thought, and grinned into the dark. Finally he cleared his throat.

"Wait there," he said, muffled but no longer whispering. "I'll come down." He closed the window and pulled down the blind.

Millennium shoved her hands in her pockets and smiled up at the Small One spinning a crazy course down the wall of the house. It was well hidden by the time the Nerd appeared, but as Millennium led him to an all-night coffee place on the Drive she knew the tumble spider was following. For once the knowledge didn't make her skin crawl. Maybe it was too busy crawling at the proximity of the Nerd.

"ALL RIGHT," HE SAID, LEANING OVER THE SMALL TABLE AT HER. "SO YOU FOUND me out. So we're even. What are you going to do about it? And don't give me any nonsense about going to the police. We both know that's the last thing you're going to do."

If she'd hated him lurking on the edges of her life, she detested him out here in the open, blinking at her with a nervous triumph. She said through clenched teeth, "Really. Why's that?"

"Because," he said, oozing smugness, "of the small matter of a warrant for your arrest back in London."

"You are such an asshole," she said, wonder in her voice. A pause to let his smugness solidify, then: "There is no warrant for my arrest. There never was a warrant for my arrest. I'm not even a missing person, you dumb fuck, I called my parents when I got to Toronto."

Smugness fell away, leaving him blinking and pale. He shoved his glasses back up his little nose. "Yeah? Well... If you were going to you would have called the cops by now."

"Yeah? Well..." she mocked him. "I can always change my mind."

"You won't." The smugness wasn't back, but the sneer he put on was just as objectionable. "You tell them I've been following you, you have to tell them why."

She put on a smile every bit as obnoxious as his sneer. "You mean tell them about how you're so hung up on me you've been following me around the country, committing bizarre acts of vandalism to get my attention and then putting the newspaper articles about them in your pathetic little scrapbook?" She put her head on one side and added sweetly, "You know, I think you're right. I guess I should talk to them after all."

He gaped, blue eyes bulging behind their lenses. "You can't tell them that. It wasn't me. You know it wasn't me! It was them!"

"Who? The cops? Man, you're even crazier than I thought." She pushed her chair back as if to go.

"*Them!*" He slapped the table, slopping coffee. "You know goddamn well what I mean. The Little People. The Fair Folk. The Deeny Shee. Don't you try to put it off on me!" He actually shook his finger at her. "Don't you dare!"

What the fuck were the Deeny Shee? Millennium shrugged and stood.

The Nerd gulped. "There are others who know," he said, voice wobbling. It was obviously his last card. "I'm not the only one. If anything happens to me, someone else will carry on with the mission. You won't get away with this." The last few words disappeared into a squeak under her glare.

"*Mission!* Are you completely insane?"

But she didn't leave, and by the look in his eyes he knew he had her. She dropped angrily back into her chair.

He shoved his glasses into place and said firmly, "We have a right to know."

"Bull *shit*."

"It is not bullshit." The obscenity was odd coming from his prim little mouth. "What is bullshit is people like you using Them for your own secret ends."

"Using—" But she bit it off. Because she had, hadn't she, that very night. Instead she said, "What do you mean, 'people like me?' What am I, a conspiracy of one? Man, you been watching too many reruns of the *X-Files*."

"Oh, please. You think we don't know about Lucy Woo in Los Angeles, or Peter Legrange in Atlanta? I'm telling you, we've been onto you for years."

A thousand questions crowded into Millennium's brain. Los Angeles? Atlanta? But the only one that made it out was, "Why?"

The Nerd blinked at her. "Why?"

"Why are you onto ... us?" *Us?! "Why have you followed me around all these years? What does any of this have to do with you?"*

"It—we—it isn't right."

Looking into his confused, magnified eyes, she felt fatigue sweep over her. "What isn't right, exactly?"

"That you have this, this secret power and—"

"Power?" Millennium gave a short laugh and spread her arms. "Do I look powerful to you?"

Blink, blink, blink. "I just mean... We all know there's more to the world than what most of us can see, but you actually get to live there. Inside the mystery." He looked down at the table, his voice dying to a sad mumble. "That's all we want. We just want to see inside the mystery too."



Millennium said nothing for a moment. The silence filled with the buzz of conversation, the hiss of steam, Dave Matthews singing “Halloween.” Then she said softly, “Your wanting doesn’t give you the right to anything in my life. Do you understand that? Take a look at yourself. You’re a stalker. Just because you’re not after sex doesn’t make you any more righteous, or any more sane.”

A tide of red swept up under his fair skin. “I’m not—” He gulped for breath. “I just... It isn’t fair! Don’t you realize how desperate the world is for a little magic, how badly it needs a miracle? You’re keeping it all to yourself and it isn’t fair!”

“Fair. Jesus. How old are you?” She propped her elbows on the table and leaned forward. “Listen. I don’t owe you a damn thing, but I’ll tell you this much. It isn’t magic, and my life is not a goddamn fairy tale. For Christ’s sake, you think I like living on the road, moving on every time the Large Ones start to wake up? They aren’t my friends, and they sure as hell aren’t anyone else’s.”

He looked up with a frown that pushed his glasses down his nose. He shoved them up again. “I don’t understand. How can you say they aren’t magic?”

“Look, it isn’t...” She’d never had to put her years of thinking into words before. “It’s not an invasion from Fairyland or the Eighth Dimension or whatever you pretend for your little game. This thing that’s been happening around me since I was a kid—and don’t ask me why they picked me, ‘cause I don’t fucking know—it belongs to this world. Maybe it *is* the world, even. Maybe it’s the life we’ve been squeezing out that has nowhere else to go. Do you get me?” By his face, definitely not. “Think about it. We’ve been trashing the environment for centuries, right? Cutting down forests, putting up farms and cities and dumps and all the rest of that human crap. Whole ecologies wrecked, hundreds of species gone, nothing standing in our way. Well...

“In grade ten biology they taught us about evolution, about how species evolve out of other species to fill in the ecological niches, keep the whole thing going. But these days we’re running out of species to evolve from. And more to the point, we’re running out of *time*. Evolution takes forever, but the new ecology, the urban ecology, has gaps that need to be filled now. You understand what I’m saying? I mean, Christ, it’s in every newspaper you read these days, biological diversity, critical density of ecologies, interdependency, blah blah blah. All it means is there has to be enough life on the planet, doing all the different things living things do to keep themselves and each other going, or everything dies. *Everything* dies.

"And the world *knows*. It knows that plain old animals and plants don't stand a chance against us humans. I mean, they tried, right? Rats and pigeons tried invading the cities, coyotes, raccoons—pests, we call them, but it's just the world trying to mix it up, keep us from taking over and burying everything under concrete. But they aren't enough. It's too slow. So..." She shrugged and leaned back in her chair, more tired than before. "So the world's trying something new. Something tough enough to survive the new ecology. Something so tough it'll maybe even be able to slow us down a little, keep us in check." She drank the last of her coffee. Cold.

The Nerd was staring, his eyelids almost still. "Show me," he said at last.

Millennium stared back. "Excuse me?"

"Show me." He leaned toward her, something inside him taking fire. "Show me what you know. Let me inside the mystery. Let me *see*."

The anger that had dissipated while she talked leapt back into her veins. This asshole hadn't heard a thing she'd said. Fine. *Fine*. She'd show the fucker his mystery and see how much he liked it up close and personal. She smiled a thin, hard smile and stood. "All right. I'll show you. And then you leave me the fuck alone. Deal?"

He gulped and shoved up his glasses. "Deal."

AFTER THE BRIGHT CAFE, THE CONSTRUCTION SITE WAS A PIT OF BLACKNESS RINGED by a plywood fence. Without the Small One to guide her, Millennium had to grope to find the gap that would let them in. Inside the mystery, she thought vindictively, listening to the Nerd squeeze his bulk through the splintery hole. As her eyes adjusted she could make out the pale blur of his face, the hand that pushed at his glasses, but the excavation remained a sinkhole of absolute darkness spined with rusty rebar. And inside, *something* lightly slumbered.

Largest One.

"What—" the Nerd began, but she shushed him.

"Wait," she whispered. "And whatever happens... Don't. Move."

Largest One. In Victoria, it had been One from the harbor that had woken one night, drawn by her presence. A shambling monster of barnacle-crusts planks, bones, and anchor chains bleeding rust, it had created havoc along the harborfront, terrifying sailors and whores and Millennium alike. She hadn't even tried to deal with it. She just ran, like she always did, hoping it would go back to sleep without her around. They always had, up till now. She'd never deliberately tried to wake one... up till now.

"Hello," she said softly into the dark. "Great One, Mighty One, awake!" Putting on a show for the Nerd. "Tonight is your night to rise. Come on. I know you can hear me. Wake up!"

The Largest One stirred. Millennium was peripherally aware of the Nerd's adenoidal breathing, and even of the more delicate presence of the Small Ones creeping over the fence, but the core of her attention was on the great being half-awake and half-formed at the bottom of its pit.

"Wake up, you beauty, you darling. It's time to come out now. It's time to walk in the night."

The Nerd's breathing stopped: he'd finally seen the Small Ones edging into the scant light around the rim of the pit. Millennium ignored him, and them. The Largest One was waking. A slow, deep scraping sound came from the pit.

The Nerd gasped. "What—"

"Shhh!" Her heart was pounding, exhilaration and fear.

*Scrape, scra-a-pe, rattle boom.*

The Nerd whimpered in his throat. The Small Ones stirred, fell still. The rain glowed with the city's ambient light.

The Largest One rose from its nest.

A damp gleaming angularity of leg. Another. A third. The domed, folded bulk of its core. The muffled fall of earth, the scrape and boom of steel. It rose, unfolding its legs. And rose some more.

Deep in the blood-thrumming moment, a tiny door in Millennium's mind opened on a glimpse of her past: eight years old, folding paper on the top of a scarred wooden desk. Origami. If some vast hand could take half a dozen dumpsters and fold them into a nightmare crab—too many legs with scissor-hinged joints and a body of eye-twisting folds—and if it could be incubated at the bottom of a muddy, garbage-strewn pit, and then wakened on a black wet three a.m.... That might begin to hint at what the Largest One was, climbing up into the city night.

The Nerd whimpered again. Millennium didn't have the breath to shush him. The Largest One paused. One long jointed limb stretched toward them with a faint gritty squeak. Dirty water pattered from the knife point at its end. It groped, delicately feeling the air. Wet mud spattered Millennium's face. Frozen with fear, she could not even flinch. But the Nerd...

The Nerd screamed and turned to run.

*Rattle snap boom.*

He hung soft and small between two pincer legs, squeaking, before Millennium even registered the cold wind of the Largest One's move. That fast. But then it fell still again, as if it didn't know what to do with

its prey now it had him. The Small Ones could have been so much trash. Another door opened in Millennium's mind: her father, pinned within the harvester's writhing frame. She gulped for air.

"Easy..."

The Largest One didn't move, but she felt its attention land on her like a blow.

"Easy, now." The words drifted out of her, gentle as the rain. "Soft little one, he hasn't done you any harm. No threat, no harm. Just a sad little squeaker. You can let him go. There's more to the city than him. There's buses and bicycles and cars. Park benches. Bus stops. Traffic lights and street signs and hot dog carts. You don't need him. You can just let him go. Can't you? You beauty, you marvel. You can just let him go."

The Largest One shifted with a slow hollow grating of joints. The Nerd hung silent and limp. God knew what damage those steel pincers had done.

"Please," she breathed, to the One, to God. "I'm sorry. Let him go." The rain on her lips tasted of salt. "Please."

There was a stir among the Small Ones. The tumble spider crept into the Largest One's shadow, tin can limbs like a tiny reflection of the other's steel. Then another moved, and another—the rebar stickmen, the dumb shock absorber frog—in a creeping, supplicating dance, a little eddy of movement that drew away from Millennium to the far side of the site. The Largest One shifted again, still holding the Nerd but its attention following the dance. Millennium loved them for that moment, those crazy lost little beings doing what they could to help.

She wiped her face on her sleeve, still afraid, but suddenly no longer frozen by it. "Okay," she said aloud. "Just let him down and off you go."

The Largest One paused, attention wavering between her and its small cousins. Then, as quickly as it had snapped him up, it let the Nerd drop. His body hit the edge of the excavation and slid to the bottom in a shower of earth. The Largest One, no longer interested, scissor-scrambled up the other side. It stepped delicately over the plywood fence and was gone, Small Ones scurrying around its feet.

In the silence of the city's hum, Millennium could hear them on the street outside, a rapid pitter-patter and an echoing rattle boom. She took a breath, and another one, and then dashed to the edge of the pit and down.

AFTER SHE'D BOUGHT HER TICKET, SHE USED A PHONE IN THE BUS STATION TO MAKE two calls. The first one to 911, telling them there was a very dazed and somewhat battered fellow sitting in the middle of a construction site just



off Commercial Drive.

The other was to her folks.

*Press one to accept the charges.*

Beep.

"Em? Where are you, sweetheart?"

"Hi, Dad. Um, the Vancouver bus station."

Sigh. "What happened this time?"

"Well, you know... Things."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Actually ... yeah. I'm okay. Only it's raining like a bitch. So I thought maybe this time I'd go south."

"Like how far south?"

She took a breath, and realized she was grinning.

"Well, I thought maybe I'd give Los Angeles a try. There's somebody down there I want to meet." •

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*Burt wanted to escape this world of empty chatter and senseless arguments. He wanted to live in the mudmen's world instead, where every little coffee stirrer and beer can was precious...*

# Show Me Where the Mudmen Go

Barth Anderson

BURT PRACTICED LYING ON THE LAST NORMAL MORNING OF his life. He had to. He had never played hooky before—not from school, not from college, not from work. Never.

“Jean?” he said, after collecting his nerve and a short-sleeve shirt to wear. “It’s Burt Moore.” Burt held up his spiral notebook and read the message he had prepared for the sales director’s secretary. “I think I caught that *flu* bug that’s going around.” He emphasized the word “flu,” because that’s the word he had underlined.

“Better stay home then, Burt.” He wondered if she was on to him when Jean added, “And on such a nice day, too.”

Burt’s heart hammered away. He had never done anything so spontaneous in his life. It was his daughter’s doing. Char came to his apartment last night, after the movers had brought all the furniture from the old house. A skinny young woman, she stood in the middle of his living room like a misplaced floor lamp. “What the hell is this?”

Her question confused Burt. Char knew the whole story, probably

better than anyone did. "Your mom wanted the house, so I took the furniture. It's all settled. We agreed—"

Char seemed ready to wince. "No. I mean, why did you arrange your apartment like this? It's just like the old place."

Burt liked this arrangement. His desk was by the door where he could always find his stamps. Bookshelves by his reading chair. No searching. "It makes sense this way."

Char folded her arms and made a face. "It's creepy."

He tried to see the room from her point of view but he couldn't. His mother-in-law's old hassock positioned neatly before the upholstered recliner; sofa square with TV. It felt cozy to Burt. "I wanted to make this apartment seem like your home."

"I've got my own apartment. And you should make this place yours, but you won't," said Char, her voice a mix of resignation and spite. "You want everything to stay the way it was, even though Mom treated you like garbage."

Lying in bed this morning, watching a sunray lengthen across his ceiling, Burt picked at Char's accusation like a scab.

"I think I'll sleep in and come in at *noon*," said Burt, still reading from his notes. He wanted to make sure he got every word right.

"Fine," said Jean. "I'll let Leon know. Get better, okay?"

Burt hung up the phone and leaned against his refrigerator. He suddenly felt like he was standing in a younger man's apartment.

BURT WENT UPTOWN TO BUY A NEW YORK *TIMES* FOR THE PUZZLE, THEN HE GOT a table at a streetside cafe and ordered a bloody mary. He was breaking so many of his rules that he almost laughed when the waitress brought his drink. Burt sipped the bloody mary and thought about a three-letter word for "hail." The bloody mary was just a little too hot but he made himself enjoy it.

After finishing his drink, he strolled from the cafe down the lane of boutiques and rollerblade rental shops to a lakeside park. He bought a roast beef sub (mayo, no onions, no mustard), spread out the *Times* arts section near the water and sat down to eat the sandwich. Pretty young women jogged by and Burt wondered if they had jobs.

Maybe it was the roast beef sandwich, or maybe it was the drink, but Burt's head felt like a heavy load. The sun-warmed ground beneath the newspaper made an inviting bed. He finished his sandwich and wadded up its tinfoil wrapper, then tossed it at a garbage can. It scooped the rim and landed near the water. Too tired to retrieve it, Burt lay back on the newspaper and shut his eyes, drifting to sleep immediately, his brain sinking

through the newspaper, it seemed, right into the dark, wet earth.

When he woke, he saw that the sun had moved to the other side of the sky, seemingly well past noon when he promised he would come to work.

Burt sat up. His heart boomed. A silhouette stood against the lake's dazzling sheen of sunlight, a thick-bodied figure, hulking near the muddy shore. It seemed a menacing, non-human thing, with thick, powerful shoulders. Mud-colored hair hung in thick drapes from its mud-colored head. It picked up handfuls of muck and watched them dribble and plop into the water, as if sifting, searching for something.

Burt let out a little laugh of disbelief. "What is this?" On the paved path, rollerbladers glided past, oblivious to the mudman splashing along the shore. Burt stood. "Hey."

The creature noticed something on the shore: Burt's wad of sandwich wrapper. The mudman's yellow eyes blared at the wrapper. It hunkered over the foil ball, hands raised as though warming itself before a campfire. It picked up a coffee stirrer from the ground beside the trash and leaned it atop the tinfoil. Then the mudman backed away, as if amazed by the arrangement. Swaying in the shallow water, it groaned. Was it in pain? No, the mudman was singing a low, reverent song to the tinfoil and coffee stirrer.

Just then, a jet began its loud descent into the city's airport. The creature twisted its body so that it could look at the sky. Burt looked up too. As the plane floated into view, engines roaring, the mudman straightened. It raised its big muddy fists and bellowed at the plane. Just when the engines were at their loudest, the mudman's voice broke into a shriek of fury. The plane passed out of view beyond the budding crowns of oaks and maples. Finally out of breath, the mudman, in heavy, plodding steps, waded out into the lake until the water drank him up.

Burt stared at the coffee stirrer and tinfoil as though they were devices from a nightmare. A jogger stopped to tie his shoe. He glanced over, picked up the items of trash and tossed them into the can. He noticed Burt watching him. "Bunch of pigs in this city, huh?"

Burt stood and walked back up the lane towards the boutiques and his car, feeling drugged and panicked. He saw a bank sign that read 4:50 PM. "Oh no. Oh my," said Burt. He had slept through the whole workday. He ran to his car and drove against rush hour traffic to his office in its downtown skyscraper, just in time to see Jean locking her door.

"Jean!" He wanted to tell her about what he had seen at the lake but his words logjammed behind a wedge of fear and confusion. The mudman's dirty hair. Its wild shriek. The coffee stirrer. The tinfoil. "I—I was

sick," he managed. "I was—overslept."

"Relax. You called in." Jean grinned at him and slipped her keys into the pocket of her long leather coat. "Besides, everyone knows you work like a dog." She brushed grass from his short-sleeve shirt. "Better stay home again tomorrow and let that sunburn settle down." Jean laughed and walked to the elevator.

Burt touched his nose. He crossed his eyes and saw that it was pink.

Alone on the twelfth floor, the memory of the mudman's scream rattled against these Polaroid windows. *No more hooky. No more spicy bloody marys*, Burt decided. He went to his sales office and stood beside his neatly arranged desk, staring out at the succinct skyline and perfect grids of traffic below. It calmed him to behold something he'd seen a thousand times before.

BURT RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AFTER LEAVING THE OFFICE AND CALLED Charlotte. His daughter immediately snared him into a terse conversation about her junker of a Subaru, but wrangling over the two hundred dollars for repairs helped him conclude that nothing strange was happening in his life. Burt went to bed early, slept long and hard, and woke up the next morning, confident that his life was back to normal after playing hooky. He locked his apartment and headed down the outdoor stairs of his second story flat, whistling the theme to the NBC national news.

But at the bottom step, he stopped. On the sidewalk about three feet from the stairs were seven cigarette butts and a piece of broken green glass. Any other day, Burt would have kept walking, but he noticed a scrap of paper underneath the cigarettes. He bent down to pick it up, a scrap of a crossword puzzle in his own block, capital handwriting. AVE.

Holding the scrap, he hunkered over the pile and looked at the rest of the items. Cigarette butts with kisses of burgundy lipstick. A perfect isosceles triangle of green glass. The random pile of trash looked just a little too much like a random pile of trash. It looked arranged to him. It looked arranged *for him*.

Burt dropped the scrap of newsprint and wiped his fingertips on his suit coat, as if the paper had left a mark on his hand.

The mudman was following him. Burt was certain. Twelve floors up in his safe office, Burt watched the other sales people at their desks, wondering if they suspected that something bizarre had encroached on his life. When Jean or the other members of his staff talked to him, they seemed to speak in a code of senseless cliches. Burt couldn't talk to his co-workers about what he had seen in the park, how that creature had arranged the coffee stirrer with insane caution. It had always been



this way, Burt knew. No one ever talked about important things, like divorce, or infidelity, or sudden moves from the suburbs into the city. Or mudmen. But it was all Burt could think about.

That night Burt came home late from the office and the arrangement of trash in front of his steps had become more elaborate. It still looked like trash to the untrained eye, but to Burt, standing over it with briefcase and newspaper in hand, he could see that personal items had been added. A wrapper from his favorite brand of candy, Uh Oh Chocolates. The torn cover of a *Sporting News* with his current downtown address on it. The shoelaces he broke last Friday.

Burt figured this was an attempt to communicate, though he couldn't parse the message. He fished through his wallet looking for an ATM receipt or an old business card to leave on the pile, but he had re-organized his wallet over the weekend. He did find the picture of his ex-wife, the one he didn't have the heart to toss out two days ago. This wasn't like throwing it away, he told himself. This was an experiment. Burt wadded it into a ball and dropped it into the center of the little trash pile. He looked around. Nothing. Burt stepped onto his weather worn stairs and peered into the dark bushes lining the alley behind his flat. There was a culvert down there, obscured by a bank of dumpsters. Between the dumpsters, about a hundred feet away, crouched a short, squat figure, its eyes shining like dimes in the dark.

"Who's there?" Burt removed his foot from the step and raised his newspaper, as if to protect himself.

The creature inched forward, until it had stepped into a pool of moonlight. It might have been the same mudman but Burt didn't think so. Its arms were longer, its hair muddier. Burt glanced around, but there was no one in sight. No one but the mudman.

"Hi," called Burt, his voice cracking.

The mudman stalked forward on all fours like an ape, big shoulders rolling. Then, just when it looked like it was about to scream or rush at Burt, it stopped and looked down at several discarded beer cans. The mudman hunkered over the cans and began sorting through them with the care of a discerning shopper. It picked up the undented ones and cooed at the dribbling liquid.

"What are you doing?" called Burt. "Do you work with the city?"

The mudman scooped up three of the cans and bobbed its upper body. Then it stood upright and with one hand made a curious, flicking gesture at Burt. A wave of dismissal? A sign of encouragement? Burt couldn't tell. The mudman scuttled backwards, gleaming yellow eyes on Burt, then dashed between the dumpsters.

Burt could hear his phone ringing upstairs but he ran down the alley. "Who are you?" shouted Burt, squeezing between the dumpsters. He could still hear the ringing telephone as if it were a noise from another world. Char was calling, no doubt, about money for her Subaru. Or maybe it was his ex-wife. Though she had wanted the divorce, Patty called him constantly to ask his advice about her stocks, calls that usually ended with them yelling at each other. He let the phone ring itself silent. Burt stood in front of the culvert and peered into the little black tunnel, wondering where the mudman was taking its precious trash.

After that, whether he was downtown in the world of slate suits, or walking through the parking lot of his favorite shopping mall, Burt found mudman messages everywhere—buttons around hydrants, toilet paper wreaths near trash cans, newspapers and milk cartons arranged in what Burt came to think of as "spells." Even if they didn't bear some scrap from his life, he felt certain they were an attempt to reach him. Seemingly nothing more than refuse, the arrangements of trash were like gold peeking beneath the frayed seams of the street.

The more messages he found, the more mudmen Burt spotted. They appeared out of nowhere and seemed to vanish like shadows in sunlight if he pursued them, so he learned simply to watch them. Shaggy mudmen investigating telephone poles and manhole covers. Grimy-faced ones creeping up on swimming pools for a whiff of chlorinated water. A wild-looking mudman even stalked through downtown, its savage yellow eyes glaring at people as they rushed to their buses and offices, heedless of the creature and the swirls of mud on its naked body. Most astounding were the two mudmen following the Memorial Day parade, scuttling behind the hooves of the mounted police horses. There was probably superb trash to inspect after a parade, Burt decided, watching the mudmen hold cups and strings of beads to each other's simian faces for perusal.

Several weeks later, Char called Burt again. "I think I'm going to need more repairs for the Subaru," she said, and the firmness in her voice cued Burt for another round of money wrangling.

Burt, however, didn't want to think about his daughter's car. He was sitting in his kitchen wondering how he could communicate with mudmen or find out where they came from. Rummaging through the trashcan beneath his sink, Burt said into the phone, "Is there some point to this argument, Charlotte?"

"Um *yeah*." She bent up the word like she was talking to an imbecile. At the age of eleven, Char had developed a contempt for her father which Burt accepted as a part of parenting a pre-adolescent. At twenty, it was part of their relationship now. "We're talking about more repairs for the

Soob, right?"

"Not really," said Burt, arranging the contents of his trashcan into a spell on the kitchen floor. "The argument never matters. It's like a code for other words we're unable to say. People at work use the same code. So does your Mom. I don't like it anymore."

"Well, maybe it's code for me getting screwed by your divorce," Char said. "Maybe it's code for 'Mom buys a houseful of new furniture and Dad works a million hours a week.' Maybe it's code for 'Char drives junk'! I just need a little more money for a car that works, Mr. Moore!"

"Are you listening?" Burt wiped coffee grounds from his hands. "Send me the bill and I'll pay it."

Char fell abruptly quiet, as if he had snatched something from her. She answered in a thin voice. "You don't care if I have a car that runs. You just don't want to talk to me anymore."

Burt laughed. "What? Do you *want* to argue?"

"I came to *you* with this." Burt couldn't believe it but his hard-boiled daughter was near tears. "Mom offered, but I came to you, because I didn't toss you aside the way she did," Char said, sounding stunned. "Fine. It doesn't matter. I'll send you the bill." Then the attitude came back into her voice. "If it makes you *happy*."

Char disconnected.

Burt was sitting in the middle of his kitchen floor, surrounded by banana peels and wads of paper towel, looking at the phone in his hand. Happy? She didn't mean to use that word, did she? "As if my happiness matters," Burt said aloud. "As if I've had anything to say about this divorce!" He punched the off button and slid the phone across the kitchen floor. Char wanted money but argued when he tried to give it to her. His wife divorced him then called him to chat, as if the life she cast away had never been precious, as if the divorce hadn't been agony.

"Happy? Happy?"

It wasn't anything but a junk word, thought Burt. Junk words in a junk argument about a junk car. Junk furniture. Junk work. Junk houses. Junk apartments. Junk time. Junk Mom. Junk Dad. Burt squeezed his head between his hands, wishing he could break it off his shoulders and throw it away.

Suddenly he could hear singing: a low, pretty croon in the dark alley behind his flat. He ran to his kitchen window and saw three mudmen hunched at the bottom of his stairs. Burt flung the door open and stepped outside. The mudmen stopped singing and glared up at him, sharp fangs gleaming wet in the light from Burt's kitchen. Had he interrupted them, as that plane had interrupted the mudman at the lake?

They looked angry, like they might charge up the steps and attack him.

Burt knelt down and made the flicking gesture that the second mudman had made.

All three stared, then shooed their dirty hands at Burt, hooting and gasping with approval like delighted chimps. Then they shoved themselves away from the staircase and vanished down the alley.

Burt ran downstairs shouting for them, but the mudmen were gone. He tried to imitate their crooning, but there was no answer from the dark. He ran to the culvert and called, "Where are you, mudmen?" He got down on his hands and knees and strained to see gleaming eyes or evidence of a path in that solid darkness. "Where did you go?"

A neighbor yelled back. "Shut up, asshole!"

Burt crawled into the mouth of the culvert, his tweed slacks wet with sewer water. He didn't care. Burt wanted to escape this world of empty chatter and senseless arguments. He wanted to crawl through this culvert and live in the mudmen's world instead, where every little coffee stirrer and beer can was precious. He wanted to join their mudman dances, sing their mudman songs. He wanted to raise his mudman arms and clench his mudman fists. He wanted to scream his deepest scream at this world's mad, intrusive din.

Burt crawled forward, the ribs of the steel culvert digging into his knees. "Mudmen? Where are you?" he shouted.

But his voice bounced back, hitting his ears in deafening echoes, and he crawled out backwards, a breach birth into the alley.

Burt went to work the next day, but only long enough to tell his boss, Leon, that he had decided to take all his vacation time in one block, over a month of unused hours. Effective immediately. Shocked, Leon asked why. Burt said he needed to "tie up some loose ends from the divorce."

Normally, his co-workers took pains not to react when they heard a word like *divorce*, but Leon put a hand on Burt's shoulder and said, "Sure, buddy, you got it. Take as much time as you need until things get back to normal."

"Right. Normal," said Burt. He thanked Leon and walked to the elevator, hoping that his life never felt normal again.

He spent the next three weeks following alleys and back streets, looking for mudmen and their secret home. He walked through backyards, under bridges, along rail beds. He slept on the green lawns of historical landmarks when the sun was out and hid under parked semis when it rained. During that time, Burt found nine trash spells. Only a few had personal items of his, and the rest looked like offerings to garbage cans and sewer drains. He made a few trash spells himself while he wandered

outdoors, but they were too neat, too orderly to hook the mudmen's interest.

Then he hit upon the idea that led him to his final and greatest discovery. He invited Char to his apartment. Fearing she wouldn't come if he told her why, he said he would order take-out for them. After they had eaten, Burt clapped his hands together and said, "Okay. Help me with the sofa?"

"Help you what?" said Char, stirring a fork through her carton of sesame chicken.

"Take it down to the alley."

She rolled her eyes. "*You're* getting a whole new furniture set, too? La dee da."

"Grab the other end of the sofa."

She hunkered down and got a grip underneath. The sofa was light but long and cumbersome. They maneuvered it out the door and down the steps with great difficulty. Across the cushionless sofa, Char's oval face was stern with concentration and Burt could see the indignant two-year-old in her eyebrows. Next they brought down the TV and recliner. Then his desk. Then the dining room set. Burt was sweating and Char laughed at him. "You look really tan," she said.

"I've been on vacation."

"You? Really?" They set the kitchen table down beside the recliner. "Why?"

For a moment, he considered telling Char about the mudmen. "Aren't you the one who said I needed a change?"

Char stood under a wash of orange light from a lamppost. "Must be a post-divorce syndrome. Mom cut her hair in a bob and died it black."

Burt picked up his mother-in-law's hassock and began breaking it into little pieces. "Does that bother you?"

"No." Char brushed her straight brown hair behind her ears. Her mother's gesture, Burt noted. "She keeps talking about how much she's growing, but the only thing that's different is her hair color. Know what I mean?"

Char watched Burt dump the broken hassock pieces on the sofa, spreading them out, fussing over their arrangement. She picked up a cushion and piled it on his growing trash spell, but Burt yanked it away. "Not there," he said. "Listen, I can take it from here."

Char folded her skinny arms and hardened her voice. "Oh. I'm being dismissed?"

Burt wondered how she would react if he told her about trash spells. She was probably the only person who might understand. "Yes. Actually



I am.” He gave her a one-armed hug and kissed her forehead. “Thanks for your help, sweetheart.”

The kiss pre-empted another senseless argument. Char hugged him back then dug car keys out of her jeans’ front pocket. “Let me know if you want help figuring out what goes in that blank space upstairs.”

Burt thought about that long after Char chugged away in her Subaru. What *does* belong up there now, he wondered, scattering waste paper and ink cartridges, pop bottles and packing peanuts around the mountain of broken furniture.

That night, confident in the power of his trash spell, Burt went out hunting for clues that the mudmen had received his giant message. Out late and too far from home, he curled up to sleep under an overpass, and the next morning he discovered the most blatant trash spell yet. At the base of the underpass concrete embankment, Burt found a long-lost set of keys for his old house. He recognized them by the key chain, which had a picture of Char as a baby. He could barely recognize Char now, the photo was so faded.

The Burt who had first seen the mudman at the lake might have wondered how they found these keys. But this Burt held them wondering where he would find the next arrangement of trash, the next message. He found another mudman dispatch in the highway’s gutter a quarter mile down the road, which included a pair of Oxford shoes that he had tossed out years ago. The next was in an abandoned lot nearby. He followed this treasure hunt—finding pens with his bite marks and a torn T-shirt with Char’s middle school logo on the back—until finally he found a junkyard crammed door to door and fender to fender with the carcasses of old cars.

As he entered the yard, mudmen emerged, more than he had ever seen in one place before. *This is it*, thought Burt. *This is where the mudmen go!* They crawled over hoods and tasted interior upholstery. They danced on car roofs and honked horns when they could find a horn that honked. Burt watched them until the sun set and the junkyard owner approached him from a one-room building by the gate. “What’re you looking for?” asked the man, drinking coffee from a styrofoam cup.

“Transmission,” said Burt. “Mustang. 1968?”

“Never saw a Mustang come through here.” The owner drained the cup and tossed it on the ground. He waved at the cup, almost as if he were shooping it away like a bird. “Find one?”

Burt noted the gesture. He looked at the owner with suspicion and said slowly, “No, I didn’t.”

The junkman returned Burt’s suspecting look from beneath his mop

of oily black hair. "You're watchin' 'em, ain't ya?" He nodded to the junkyard, crawling with mudmen. "Those critters."

Burt whispered, "I didn't think anyone else could see them." He felt like Stanley bumping into Livingston. "Do you know where they come from?"

The man juttied his jaw and dug a groove in the gravel with his Redwing boot. "They come from, you know, some other place," he muttered. "When two worlds come together... there's overlap, but not... aw. It's been too long since I talked about that."

Burt wanted to wring the words out of the junkman's throat. "Two worlds? Overlap? Yes?"

"Words is useless to talk about them. Ain't you noticed that by now?" he said. "Words just get in the way of what matters. Whoa." The junkman lifted his eyes to the junkyard and made the gesture again. "You gonna get the whole show tonight."

Ten mudmen, each atop a different car, stood with one muddy arm in the air and began crooning at the sky. The sun's bloody colors faded and night unfolded. Burt noticed the moon raised like an idol in the east.

All the mudmen made their sacred, silly gesture together, shooing the moon, maybe waving it on its way to greater heights. Burt made the gesture too. "Do they live here?"

The man slid his hands in his pockets, his posture a lazy question mark. "Naw. They're just doin' some religious thing."

"A ceremony?"

The man shrugged and spat. He looked cautiously at Burt from under his thick brows. "Everything, *everything* is a spirit ceremony to them. Everything they do is for the spirits. They keep the moon up with their little sculptures. And us. We're spirits, too, you and me, mister. We're angels and our junk is sacred." The man didn't seem to want to sound judgmental. "They're real good folks though."

The mudmen turned in circles atop their cars, making their magic gesture at the junkyard, then at one another. Two mudmen scrapped on a Continental, their muck spewing over the wide metal hood. Burt said, "How did you learn all this? Why did they pick me?"

"It's late now. Gotta hit the security system," the man said, slouching away from Burt.

Burt didn't want to anger the junkman but he wanted an answer, so he followed the man and touched his arm. "Why do we see them, but no one else does?" The yard bobbed and swayed with mudmen and their chorus sounded like a hooting hymn. "Do you know where they go when we can't see them?"

The junkyard owner looked at his watch. "You ask a lot of questions."

The bouncing, laughing mudmen sounded like a playground of monkeys. Burt watched them with envy. His vacation was over in just a few days and he would have to return to his job. "Just answer this. Can I go where they go? Can I find where they live and go there?"

"That I can answer." The man shook his head and said, "No, you can't."

"'No'?" said Burt. "Why not?"

"This is your world."

Burt could see the city skyline and his office tower from the junkyard. A plane twinkled overhead. "But why is this my world?"

"Why, why, why? Sheesh, mister. Because it's perfect, that's why." The junkman stopped walking and said, "The moon belongs up there and we belong down here. We make junk. Them critters worship junk. That's what they're dancing about, mister. A perfect arrangement."

Burt's own suffocating world was right outside the junkyard gate, a world of senseless arguments and meaningless work. "I just don't want things to go back the way they were."

"Don't worry. Those critters won't let you be normal never again." The junkman's posture stiffened in a way that told Burt the conversation was over. They shook hands, then the man lifted a finger toward the gate. "I'll keep an eye peeled for that Mustang tranny. Come again now."

Burt didn't want to leave the mudman ceremony but the junkyard owner's words were reassuring. He figured he would take the man at his word and come again. As Burt walked towards the gate, he spotted a rusted car antenna in the dust. He held it up for the junkman to see.

"That's a good souvenir," said the owner. "Take it."

Burt left the junkyard and walked down the empty, lifeless highway that would lead him home, holding onto that bent antenna like a talisman.

Two days later, Burt went back to work. Downtown. Twelfth floor. Hustle and bustle. Though everyone greeted him with cheery platitudes, he could tell that his co-workers thought he had sailed over the edge. Jean came into his office conspiratorially and told him that Ron in accounts payable had seen Burt on the highway turning an old shoe over in his hands with an eerie look on his face. Jean rested a hip against his desk. "Is that true, Burt? Did you have yourself a little breakdown, maybe?"

Breakdown. Breakdown. The exact, perfect word. Strange to hear it from someone in his office. "Yeah, some things got broken down, all right. Nothing's the same anymore."

For a moment, Jean seemed to scramble for the office cliches that kept

life perpetually understandable. But then she lowered her voice and said, "Are you really ok? Are you happy, Burt?"

Burt was content to keep his story to himself for now. He patted her hand. "Happy as a clam, Jean."

Several days later, his daughter came to his flat unannounced. It was a moment he feared, wondering what she would say about his apartment now. "We haven't talked much since we cleared out your pad," Char said at the kitchen door. She tried to look past him into the flat. "What have you been up to?"

"Adjusting to work," he said. Burt knew he couldn't keep Char out, so he opened the door and let her in nervously. "I cut back to twenty hours a week, but it's still hard."

Char threw her backpack on the kitchen counter. "You? You cut back to—?" Then she froze, staring into his living room where framed trash spells covered the walls and new, unframed ones were scattered over the floor. With his extra time this week, Burt had bought twelve old picture frames and fixed the items of various arrangements within.

Char walked into the living room in slow, careful steps. She turned a circle, looking at the framed litter covering the walls. His apartment was one giant trash spell. "What is this?"

"I've been—" He fell quiet. Burt laughed at himself. He thought of the junkman's lack of words.

"This is amazing," she breathed in wonder, walking from frame to frame. Rings of coke cans. A chocolate-wrapper mosaic. Antenna with house keys and ripped family photos. "Are you taking art classes?"

Art. Burt hadn't thought of the trash spells that way but he liked the word. Art. He repeated it a few times aloud and then said, "No classes. It's just me." Burt had believed that he would never tell anyone what happened to him, but he also knew the only person he wanted to tell was Char. So he did it. He told her about the mudmen and their perfect arrangements of trash. He told her how mudmen treated everything as if seeing it for the first time, whether garbage or gold.

Char listened to his story with her thin arms crossed over her chest, looking at the walls. When he finished, she said, "I could tell something was up with you the last time we talked." She looked at his tinfoil and coffee stirrer sculpture. "Do you believe what happened to you?"

The question shocked him. He looked at the walls and lifted his hand. "Of course I do. I was going to take all of this down eventually. Just not yet."

"Oh no, I hope you don't! They're so beautiful, so freaked out and so..." she shook her head, sifting through possible words, "not you."

Char couldn't stop looking at the tinfoil spell. "Mudmen."

Burt looked at the tinfoil sculpture, his favorite. "Do you want that one?"

"This one? You'd give it to me?"

"If you like it."

"I love it. It's like you tossed it down randomly and glued it. But there's a pattern too. Wild."

He lifted the spell from its hook on the wall and handed it to Char. "If your mom asks, don't tell her about the mudmen, ok? I haven't told anyone else about them."

"She wouldn't get it." Char's eyes brimmed with the trash magic in her hands. He wondered if she would start seeing them now, but maybe that would require a true mudman spell for her to discover on her own. "I'm going to put this in my bedroom when I get home."

As she walked into the kitchen with the framed trash spell, he waved at her turned back, flicking his hand hopefully. •

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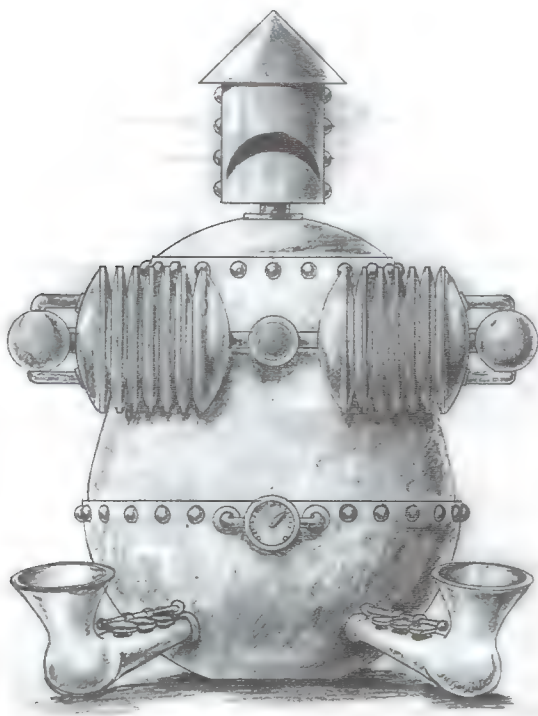
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*For Jeff de Boer, it is not enough to imagine these fantastic visions: he drags them into our world, embodies imagination in alloy....*



*“A POET-CRAFTSMAN OF SOME UTTERLY SINGULAR SENSIBILITY—as though a Tiffany or Cartier had somehow been crossed with an oddly sunny version of H.R. Giger—de Boer’s jewel-like, exquisitely articulated miniature exo-skeletons, his mutant samurai helmets, his Ur-Moderne rocket ships and flying saucers, though rendered with the utmost physical sophistication, possess the purity and innocence of the truest folk art”*

— William Gibson, from his introduction to Jeff de Boer’s book, *Articulation*.



photos by Pierre Hamel

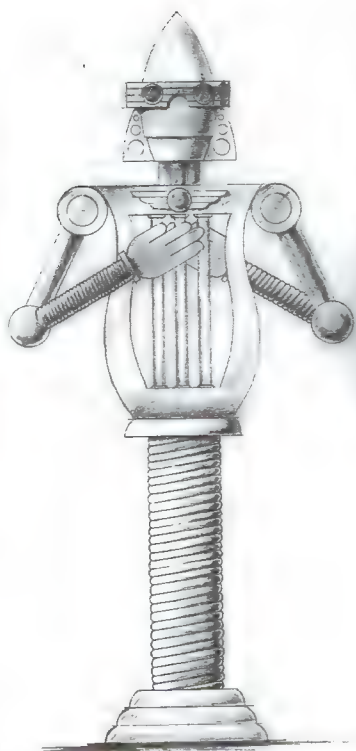
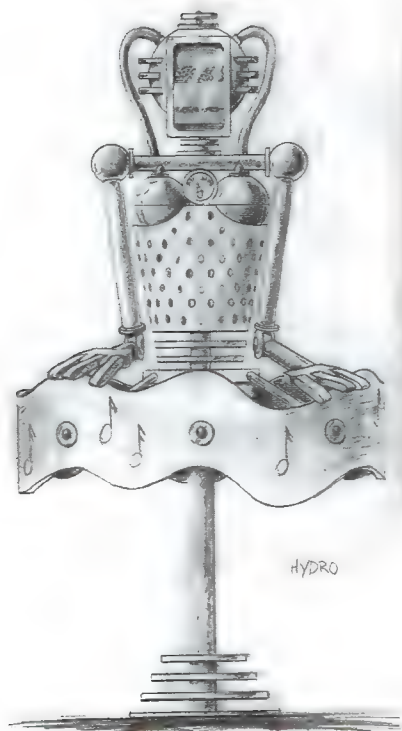
## About our cover artist, Jeff de Boer

# Imagination in alloy

Gordon Snyder

*ZANY. CLEVER. CHARMING. SERIOUS.* THESE ARE THE ADJECTIVES that spring to mind when I recall my meeting with Jeff de Boer and his wife Debbie in their Calgary studio. Surrounded by works in progress (including studies for a large commissioned piece for the Calgary airport), de Boer spoke frankly about his art and his ambition. For him, it is not enough to imagine these fantastic visions: he drags them into our world, embodies imagination in alloy.

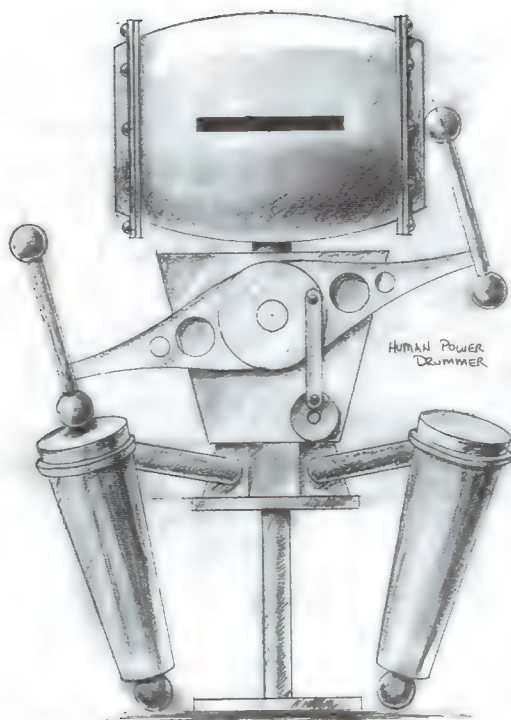
As drawing is my own favorite art form, I went directly from the slides of his finished works to the conceptual drawings from which they were born. Many of de Boer's works—the armor, the ties, the helmets and the famous briefcase—are beautifully illustrated in his book, *Articulation* (now unfortunately out of print). Within those pages, a family of robots developed for Science World in Vancouver illustrate just how incredible this artist really is.



Science World hired de Boer to create an interactive display demonstrating four types of energy creation—hydroelectricity, solar power, human power, and wind. The resulting design is reminiscent of *The Jetsons* or even a robotic *Partridge Family*. De Boer offered some unique drawings of a robotic musical group in which each band member represents one of the four types of energy.

A golden father, with sunglasses and a harp-shaped body, represents Solar energy. Mom is Hydro, an assemblage of pressure vessels with a head like a diving mask, and ocean patterns/waves on her dress. The teenager is all too Human, all head and knees (which are also drums). Baby is Wind, with a shrieking whistle for a head and saxophone feet.

The result is one of the most popular exhibits at Science World. The baby pumps the bellows; the teenager bangs, angst-ridden, upon its own head and knees; Mom's upper torso spins 360 degrees, hands resting on the edge of her dress as if she is dancing; and Dad springs up and down playing his harp-chest. The music made by the family of robots (created



by Calgary composer Kai Posente and commissioned especially for this display) plays in perfect synch to the robots' choreography.

De Boer believes that engineers and computer specialists need to attach the appropriate aesthetic to robotic designs. His vision melds the aesthetic and the technological in a way that makes it easy to imagine robots fitting into our future. He produced this family of robots thinking back in time rather than forward—as a mechanical and figurative family of metal that would both amuse and educate. The inspiration behind his other projects is sometimes more subtle—I confess I didn't quite follow his thoughts on the robotic "tilbylbitian exoskeletal skins" he's working on for an upcoming movie set. No matter. I'll remain happily fascinated by the fact that this artist can envision, design and create something like this robotic family.

Watch for this genius to appear in many more forms and check out his web site at [www.jeffdeboer.com](http://www.jeffdeboer.com). You won't be disappointed. •

*His mind groped for sanity and  
succeeded only in building more  
insanity. How could she be here at all?*

# Where Magic Lives

S.A. Bolich

“WHAT THE—”

It was the fourth time in five minutes Rayburn had dropped the pen while attempting to add up accounts, never his best activity even when the pen cooperated. It rolled off the desk and struck the hardwood floor with a clatter. He spent several minutes scrabbling under the desk without success, scratching his hand in the process. Finally he gave up and straightened, sucking his hand. And there was his pen, lying quietly atop the day’s schedule. He stared.

“I know it hit the floor,” he muttered, somewhat spooked. He frowned and reached for it. It rolled away from his touch, skipping maddeningly out of reach. He snapped a word that would have shocked his clients, and slammed his palm down on it. Eyeing it suspiciously, he reached for the morning mail, at which point the pen slithered through his fingers like a greased eel and landed triumphantly atop the schedule again. Rayburn shook his hand, which felt queerly as if the thing had *moved* against his fingers, and glared, baffled. The rotten thing even seemed to have found the same resting spot, snuggling possessively over the last name on the list.

“All right! You win!” he snapped to the air, a habit he discovered him-



self-indulging in more and more. But then, Rayburn Senior's spirit never seemed far, an oppressive nudge peering down at his son struggling dutifully to maintain the funeral home that had been the old man's pride and joy. Ray looked at the last column of the list, which stated the cost of the service, and saw CC in each block in Liz's neat hand. And *that* meant the fixed fee Clark County allowed for paupers.

He sighed. "Go polish your halo, Dad. Even you hated burying vagrants."

Ah, well. Business was business, even if it meant the best parlor would go unused today, its charm hidden away for more prosperous clients. That parlor was the only nice thing in the whole place, trimmed just so, not gaudy, no, but not gloomy either, a place of light from clever arrangement of windows, the slanting rays all congregating on the dear departed, lending thoughts of heaven to those left behind. A masterpiece, if he said so himself, though of course he never did. The last thing people wanted in a funeral director was enthusiasm.

Or red hair and a terminally boyish face. Liz was the only one who appreciated those. Rayburn the Younger sighed and wondered idly if he could persuade this nagging ghost to just step in and run the place for him while he and Liz skipped out to Tahiti.

He shook his head. "Listen to yourself, Ray," he muttered. "Dad wouldn't get caught dead believing in ghosts."

Which struck him funny, and he started to chuckle, because certainly his soberly proper parent had been too staid to accept supernatural phenomena. Or magic. Or fun, come to that. The pen was just a pen, and Ray's fingers were cold with January chill, and *of course* that explained why the pen refused to leave the last name on the list when he tried still again to pick it up. This time it flat wouldn't budge, as if the ink had turned to glue and oozed out all over the barrel.

He stared, the hair lifting on the back of his neck. "All right, I'm looking now, okay?" he said, bending to the absurd.

Cautiously he reached for the pen. Now he knew for sure it wasn't his father leaning over his shoulder, because whatever was controlling the pen was listening to him. It came sweetly away in his hand. He eyed it, and then cautiously picked up the list and read the name the pen had seemed so eager to point out.

No devils there, just an ordinary name that sounded vaguely familiar. He frowned, trying to place it. This town wasn't so big that he didn't know all the people worth knowing. But it eluded him, and his frown deepened. "Eleanor Dancy," he muttered, over and over. "Who the heck was Eleanor Dancy?"

"*The Tale of the Oak*," Liz said behind him, and he jumped a foot.

"What?" He was so rattled he dropped the list. Liz bent to pick it up off the floor, brushing long dark hair out of her face as she handed it to him, smiling wisely. "*The Tale of the Oak*," she repeated. "You said once it was one of your favorite books."

"When I was about ten," he answered reflexively, and then his eye dropped again to the list she handed him. "Eleanor Dancy! I didn't know she lives here!"

"Used to live," Liz reminded him gently. "Not many other people remembered her either, it looks like." He remembered then, the coroner's report that had arrived with the body, of how and where she had been found, huddled alone in a freezing apartment.

"Oh, damn," Rayburn muttered, genuinely regretful. He had been enchanted for years by Eleanor Dancy's gentle books, full of wonderful, glowing characters who rode unblinkingly into danger for the sake of friendship and honor, and sometimes didn't come out unscathed. They had taught him a great deal about living one's life in a fashion *worth* living, and he had kept a tattered copy of *The Tale of the Oak* well into college, when he had let his roommate tease him into getting rid of it. He had regretted it for years, and finally forgotten it—until now.

A deep and abiding sense of shame took him. How could he have forgotten people who had helped shape his life: dashing Alan, laconic Guy, shy William, who had proved the bravest of them all? Or pretty, spoiled Isobel, or brave Anne, or fiery Meg? Or Peter? Lord, he had cried himself to sleep once over Peter, the lonely free lance who had discovered friendship too late. It had been years before he found the courage to pick up *The Winter Knight* again. How on earth could he have forgotten Eleanor Dancy's name, the incredibly gifted lady who had given them all life?

"Ray?" Liz was looking at him oddly, concern in her brown eyes. He shook himself and stood up, glancing at the clock. Elation filled him. There was still time to ready the best parlor before the first scheduled service. Thank God he prided himself on giving even paupers a proper sendoff. Eleanor was decently dressed and her hair had been done yesterday by Nora Waters, whose only talent in life lay in her magical affinity for hair. His mouth quirked. Magic ... lives where it is welcome. Hadn't Miles said that?

"Are you all right?" Liz asked softly. "You look like—I don't know, kind of weirded out. Maybe you should let Jack take Ms. Dancy's funeral."

"No!" he snapped, and put out a hand to erase the instant hurt in her eyes. "I'm sorry, hon. I want to do hers. Her books were such magic, and no one remembers them anymore. She deserves to have one fan—one

mourner at least, to honor her and say goodbye. I want to."

She looked at him straightly. "Some days I do remember why I love you," she said, and lifted on her toes to kiss him before marching out to deal with the phone ringing down the hall. "I'll tell Jack to set up Number One," she called over her shoulder.

He shook his head, grinning helplessly. She had read his mind, as usual. He glanced at the clock again and hurried out of the office and down the hall to the best parlor, let himself in and stood for a moment, savoring the wonderful atmosphere in this place. It was very much like a medieval cathedral in some ways, hushed and full of light and reverence, exactly the sort of place to pay last respects to a woman who had brought the Middle Ages to vivid life for uncounted thousands of rapt young readers. He moved down the aisle, noting reflexively that everything was dusted and tidy, though the flower stands were empty. *That* was no good. He strained to recall what was in today's flower order that he could filch—

"Excuse me."

The voice sounded tentative, echoing oddly in the hush. He whirled, prepared to be annoyed, and stopped at sight of a young, red-haired woman peering uncertainly in at the door, just her face visible around the jamb. He halted, professional manners coming to the fore.

"Yes?" he asked politely. "Were you looking for Mr. Edson's service? Two doors down on the—"

"Oh, no! No!" she interrupted rather breathlessly. She had an odd accent, not quite British, not quite French. He couldn't place it. "I wanted Ele—Miss Dancy's."

"Oh!" It was his turn to be flustered. He had assumed from the fact that it was Ms. Dancy's landlord who found her, several days after the rent was due, that there would be no one to attend her service. "Of course," he managed. "You're in the right place. But you're a bit early, I'm afraid. It's not until eleven. You're welcome to wait, of course."

She came farther into the room, a slim figure in tight pants and tall boots and some sort of long shirt, the colors and details all but lost in the dazzle pouring in the side windows. All he really saw was the glorious red hair tumbling loose over her shoulders. Not carrotty, like his, but that deep rich auburn shade he had admired since he first discovered his own was never going to be that color.

She slid into a pew. "Thank you," she said faintly. "I will wait. What is the hour now?"

"Um—" He peered at his watch, wondering again about her native tongue. "Five to ten."

She frowned a little uncertainly. "Thank you. Where—where is she?"

She sounded definitely ill at ease. Not an uncommon reaction. He was long accustomed to eyes peering about his establishment as if expecting to see embalmed bodies lying everywhere. He put on his most soothing manner.

"I'll bring her in shortly. Would you like an open casket?"

He distinctly heard her swallow. "N-no, I don't think so," she said faintly, and her accent was suddenly thicker.

"As you wish," he said courteously, and moved toward the side door. He hated wheeling in caskets with mourners already in attendance, but this time it couldn't be helped. Idly he wondered where this girl came from and what her connection to Eleanor Dancy might be.

He busied himself for half an hour, sneaking a few flowers from parlor three, provided by the house to brighten the sad and empty parlors of those people who truly would have no one to see them off. He gave them to Liz to install in Number One, and took himself into the back. He hesitated, eyeing the plain casket he had given Ms. Dancy from the county funds allotted to see her decently interred. Before he could change his mind he transferred her to an elegant mahogany thing no one in this town could afford anyway. It was his favorite, lovingly polished and dusted for the last three years, admired by all, purchased by none. She looked tiny in it, a gentle-looking old lady who had given so much to so many. He smoothed down her faded gray hair, looking down at her face. She had lived right here in his town, and he had not known. He had never even known what she looked like, and now he would be the last to ever see her.

The thought saddened him. Hastily he shut the casket lid before depression overwhelmed him. He wheeled it down the corridor and in at the side door of Number One.

And halted in confusion, staring at the packed pews in front of him. Where had all these people come from? The place was full from front to back, incredible for an unannounced funeral. And then anger overcame the shock, and he caught himself from glaring at them all. Where had they been, these friends of Eleanor's, when she died alone? Why hadn't they cared enough to call her, and discover her before a week had gone by?

Grimly he wheeled the casket into place. It gleamed in the fall of sunshine, pierced by three long shafts of sun that brought the rich color up out of the wood and set the brass glowing. *Like gold and jewels*, he thought fondly, remembering the various ephemeral objects the heroes of her books had been wont to quest for. Things that had seemed so important

until actually discovered, when invariably they had turned out less worthwhile than the friendships cemented along the way.

"Be ye starting soon?" a voice called behind him.

He blinked. A Scot? Here? Good Lord, how extraordinary. Instantly his mind slipped sideways to *The Hidden Glen* and tall Jamie MacDougall, who had worn knives in his socks and used them once to save his worst enemy, because it would not have been honorable to let him drown in the magical flood conjured by evil Angus o' the Glen. They had set aside their hatred to survive, and ended up friends...

"Sir? Might we see m'lady?"

He frankly stared that time. For the first time in his life he cursed the strong sunlight in this place. Peering through it from behind as he was, he could hardly make out the shapes of the people in front of him, let alone faces, but surely that man over there in the corner was wearing a coat of arms? The colors blazed, red and gold, and however gaudy today's youth had grown, Ray could not think of one who was given to wearing dragons on his chest. *Dragons...*

His mind reeled. *Miles* had worn dragons, Sir Miles whose ancestors had been Kings of England back when the Saxons still ruled. God, it had to be a joke. And a rotten, cruel one, to come to a funeral dressed in costume. He took a step forward, a vague notion forming itself in his mind of throwing out the miscreant.

"Sir?"

He placed the voice that time, made out through the sparkle a pretty, earnest face peering up at him anxiously. A face he *knew*. He had seen it a thousand times, caught in living color in the illustrations for *The Tale of the Oak*. Meg.

She stood up hesitantly, and he saw that she was wearing the same dress. Same flowing sleeves, same tight waist and demure bodice, same girdle emphasizing the slimness of her waist, a shimmer of blue and green beneath a gleaming fall of hair like spun sunlight. Lord, how had she come through downtown dressed like that? His mind groped for sanity and succeeded only in building more insanity. How could she be here at all? She had never existed.

"What?" he stammered feebly, because they were all looking at him now. Their eyes were intent and earnest and somehow more vivid than the eyes of modern people, as if the time they inhabited was so full of sudden death that they had learned in the cradle to pay attention, lest they miss any small aspect of the lives that could be snatched from them so suddenly.

"Might we see her, please, sir?" God, it *was* Meg, bold Meg speaking up

for them all.

"Of—of course," Ray stammered, and somehow found his professional mask again. He turned and lifted the coffin lid, exposing the gentle face, which even yet showed nothing of the long days between death and discovery. Thank heaven it had been so cold in that apartment.

There was a stir behind him. Startled, he turned, and saw that the whole crowd of them were on their feet, the foremost craning their necks unconsciously to see past the dazzle into the casket itself. Meg drew in a slow, audible breath and slowly stepped up beside Rayburn, her eyes fixed on Eleanor's peaceful face.

"Oh," she said softly, and her voice was the musical lilt he had always imagined, gentle and kind as the one who made her. Her hand went up to cover her mouth, and her vivid blue eyes sparkled with tears in the brilliant light. Rayburn's training cracked; he half-moved to comfort her, and stopped as someone stepped into the space at his other elbow. He looked up, and saw Sir Miles of Etherby looking gravely down at him. Tall for his generation he had been, Miles, a quiet giant who still stood a full two inches taller than Ray himself, whose six-foot-plus went unremarked in the modern era.

"Might we have a bit of time with her?" the knight asked, his voice a mellow baritone.

"Certainly," Rayburn said, and stepped aside.

He watched, bemused, fascinated as one by one in orderly procession the mourners came forward. *So many*, he thought, *so many children come to pay their respects*. Old, young, children, graybeards—all the rich and varied populace of a world dead six hundred years—but living yet in the depths of old bookstores, waiting patiently on library shelves for a small hand to turn a page and stumble into magic. Rayburn found his eyes blurring, and lifted a surreptitious hand that came away wet. He was forced to turn away when Peter—it could only be Peter, his grace marred by the limp left over from his last tournament—made his way to the front of the line and dropped lightly to one knee.

"I've come, *ma mère*," he said softly. "To thank you."

Gently he touched Eleanor's still cheek. Miles, standing like a guard of honor at her head, reached out and dropped a big hand on the younger man's shoulder. Peter looked up and smiled, and Rayburn looked hastily away.

Presently he looked back, in time to see Peter lift himself to his feet again and stoop to set a light kiss on Eleanor's brow before turning away. Ray did not see who else came after that—did not see anything but a watery dazzle of light filled with shapes impossibly dressed.



After what seemed a very long time silence descended again. The rustling of clothing and soft shuffling of feet ceased, and Miles' voice filled the parlor. "Good sir, were there words ye wished to speak?"

Ray jumped. His eyes slid reflexively toward the door, which somehow had gotten closed, and then to the minister's pew to one side. It did not greatly surprise him to find someone occupying it, a stooped scarecrow of a man in the plain brown robes of a monk.

"I—" he began, and gestured gracefully toward the monk. How well Rayburn knew him! So stubborn had Father Anselm been in his faith that the Devil himself had gone sulking away from his abbey, and so stubbornly righteous that Sir John and Isobel—there they were, in the second row, still nestling like turtledoves—had spent half of *The Rowan Tree* proving to him they were serious in their defiant quest for marriage.

"There are," he finished. "But I would like to say them after Father Anselm has spoken."

Row upon row of silent eyes assessed him for a moment, and then Miles nodded. "So be it." He turned to the monk, who stood. "Father Anselm. Our lady was no long-winded, so please be ye not, either."

A ripple of laughter ran through the parlor. Rayburn grinned along with them, a thrill of pleasure shooting through him at sharing that private joke. Anselm, as madly intense as ever, gave Miles a withering glare and took his place at the podium, peering at it curiously for a moment before losing himself in the matter at hand. His hand moved restlessly across the polished surface, ignoring the King James Bible that lay there. With another small thrill Rayburn realized that for Anselm, the words were far older, and written in another tongue altogether.

Anselm lifted his head. His voice was surprisingly melodious, clear and strong enough to come back in echoes overhead. Rayburn looked up, startled, as chanting drifted back like birds from the vaulted ceiling, the beautiful deep chanting of a monkish choir, sounding the responses of the ancient service for the dead. He blinked. Vaulted ceiling? But the light was too bright; his gaze wavered and dropped to the dark figure wrapped in light, straight and unbreakable as the cross itself. The chanting went softly on, counterpoint to a long Latin prayer that Rayburn did not understand, during which no one in the audience moved a muscle. Eventually the monk fell silent, and heads lifted to meet his stare. Ray was shocked to see tears glinting on that ascetic face.

"I shall not speak to ye of the world beyond, or of the fact of God's good grace with this gentle lady lying here. We know already she is at His knee even now, for sure and the evil one could have no power over her, and her sins so light her time in purgatory was but a breath, over before

it was well begun. I shall say only that but for her this gathering could not be, and so let us rejoice in the memory of she who made us, even ye, Angus Blackheart, and a more wicked man I never met."

There was an inarticulate rumble somewhere toward the back, overlaid by a fierce and masculine, "Shush, Angus, ye crashin' bullock!"

"I'll not be shushed by the likes of Jamie MacDou—"

"Both of ye shush or you'll both be recitin' paternosters until the good Lord comes into His own!" Anselm bellowed. Profound silence fell again.

Rayburn fought a mad smile tickling the corners of his mouth. This wasn't really happening. Any moment now Jack the handyman was going to open the outer door and peer in, and find him daydreaming all alone in front of Eleanor Dancy's casket. Unimaginative Jack, whose very foot-fall would shatter Merlin's most puissant spell.

*Stay away*, he begged silently, and looked up at Anselm to find the monk watching him expectantly.

"Brother Gregory," the monk intoned, and he jumped, for not even Liz called him by his given name. He far preferred Ray.

"Will you say your piece now?"

Rayburn stood uncertainly away from the wall, nervous, now that it came to it, facing a crowd unlike any other he had ever encountered. The stock words of comfort that fell so soothingly from his tongue stuck there now as he moved into the place at the podium vacated by Father Anselm. What would these intense, deeply religious folk know of the glib lip service of his century to the god they kept at their elbow?

He looked out at them watching him so gravely, a host of people he had never seen—and yet he could name them all, even the red-haired girl who had been first of all. Dear, hoydenish Anne, whose boy's breeks and boots and skill with a bow had once saved a prince. All at once he realized that if Liz had possessed red hair, she would look just like Anne. Was that why he had been so strongly attracted to her, felt so surely as if he knew her, like an old friend waiting to be? He had no doubts Liz could match any evil Duke ever born...

He cleared his throat hesitantly. "My friends," he began, faltered, and went on, deliberately. "Yes, I believe I can say that in all truth. You are my friends, the friends of my childhood and my growing up. For year after wondrous year I lived your adventures. I cried with you, and laughed with you, and ran in breathless fright with you, and stood on lonely hilltops and fought with you. You made my life rich in ways I never even understood until this moment. I am ashamed to say that at some point I forgot you. I forgot Eleanor Dancy. I forgot the elemental magic that created

you. But you didn't. You remained true to your own world and to each other, as unchanging as the goodness that brought you forth. You taught me things I can never thank you for. *Eleanor* taught me. This wonderful lady, with her vast talent and imagination, made a whole world in her own image, a thing given to few to do—and fewer to do well. Yet the fact that she did do it superbly is attested to here, today, in the sight of all of you. I look at you, and I think I must be mad. I know you—and yet you never lived. Not really. Nowhere except in the minds and hearts of a million children—and a million adults who were better for the experience. Perhaps I'm dreaming right now, standing here in the dazzle letting myself be carried away by memories brought forth by a name on my roster of services today. Eleanor Dancy. I forgot her once. But I shall not again. And I shall not forget you. My friends. Thank you for coming."

His voice broke. There was a long, intense silence. And then a rustle filled it, and he looked up through tears to see them all on their feet again, nodding at him gravely as they filed past once more. Hands reached to touch him and moved on to trail lightly over the polished mahogany of Eleanor's last dwelling before they faded from his sight, blocked by flowing robes or glinting armor or the rich silks of another time. Gradually the room grew quieter; the faint rustling faded, and he looked up in a sort of panic to see the door at the far end standing open once more and the crowd passing through it one by one. *My God, what if someone sees them?* he thought dizzily. But—he could see the wall of the corridor beyond, despite the silent throng in the aisle. Meg passed through—and disappeared.

"No!" he cried softly, half reaching after her.

"We cannot stay longer," a voice said beside him, strangely compassionate.

He looked up into Miles' grave brown eyes. The knight nodded at him and started past. Ray suddenly could not bear to let him go so quickly. "Wait—please." He caught Miles' arm, and felt with a thrill through his whole body the mail beneath the velvet surcoat. The knight turned and looked at him calmly, but Ray felt his impatience to be gone. Truly his time was running out.

"Tell me—why did you come? *How* did you come?"

Miles gave him a surpassingly gentle look that nevertheless made Ray feel like a slightly retarded child. "She was our mother. How could we not come to honor she who gave us life?"

Ray swallowed hard. "Aye," he whispered, and never heard how he reverted instinctively to speech patterns he had outgrown years ago—the day he set aside these old friends for new ones. "I understand.

But—how?”

Miles shrugged. “It is not my place to question the mind of God, good sir. I leave that to the clerics. I am but a knight, and ignorant of such matters. Suffice it that we wanted to come, and it was granted.”

He inclined his head politely and moved on, to vanish like the others at the door. Ray stood alone in the sunlight, groping after reality. And slowly a grin started clear at his toes and burst upward through his body until his whole being felt like a smile. He wanted to shout, to dance, to turn handsprings over the pews like a child and run laughing down the halls, trailing magic like fizzing bubbles of joy. How had he forgotten where magic lived?

Softly he leaned down and kissed Eleanor Dancy’s faded cheek. “Good night, my lady,” he whispered, and gently closed the lid of the casket. An instant later the sun climbed beyond the window, taking the dazzling sunshaft with it. The medieval cathedral vanished along with the faint chink of Miles’ mail shirt.

But away up toward the ceiling, sounding softly in quiet defiance of the strictures of adulthood, rang a faint, silvery shiver of notes, like the distant horns of the Faerie hunt, drifting up from ’neath the roots of a great oak... •

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*A bolt of lightning lit the sky with  
eerie blue light. At the same time, the  
airplane dropped five hundred feet like  
an express elevator heading for the  
basement...*

# Homing Instinct

Ann Marston

I DIDN'T LIKE THE LOOK OF THE CLOUDS. THEY WERE LOW AND black, and spitting moisture that wasn't quite rain. The weather report had warned of scattered thunderstorms over the mountains. Night flying and thunderstorms made a bad combination.

I stood on the ramp, watching the clouds flow across the darkening sky, and I couldn't help thinking about Seth again. It was almost a year ago now that he had taken off from this airport to make the trip across the mountains. He never made the other side, and the searchers never found the aircraft. Seth's slow, warm smile and his blue eyes—brilliantly blue as a September sky—haunted my dreams. I never had the chance to say goodbye. It left everything unfinished, hanging in a strange limbo where I couldn't quite believe that Seth was really dead, but he wasn't nearby to comfort me in my loss.

I guess grief doesn't always have to make sense.

For a moment, I wasn't sure if the moisture on my cheeks was rain or tears. I shook off the fleeting melancholy and walked to the aircraft. The cargo needed checking.

The Twin Otter sat patiently on the ramp in the drizzle. It wasn't the prestigious airline jet I'd once dreamed of flying, or even the sleek,

corporate jet I would have settled for. The Twin Otter was a workhorse, plain and simple. Built for sheer, dogged endurance and carrying capacity rather than speed and grace, it was reliable and sturdy, utilitarian if not luxurious. It had what Seth referred to as “the beauty of function.” Less than an hour after he introduced me to the airplane, I fell in love with it. It wasn’t long after that I realized I’d also fallen in love with Seth.

The cabin was stuffed to the overhead with cases of tinned food, insulated cartons of frozen goods, and three large wooden crates containing drill bits. I wandered, checking cargo nets and straps. The weight and balance report put us less than three hundred pounds below maximum gross weight. The Tw’otter was not going to be a frisky bird tonight.

The weather briefer said we might run into turbulence in the clouds, and I wanted to make sure the cargo stayed put. Dealing with thunderstorm-related turbulence severe enough to shake the fillings out of teeth is bad enough. A couple thousand pounds of cargo sliding around in the back can become downright discouraging, and it plays havoc with the center of gravity.

Everything looked fine. I double checked, then climbed back down onto the ramp and walked across the wet concrete to the tin shed airport office.

Tad was by the desk, busy tearing the top three inches off the sides of a styrofoam coffee cup. He filled the remaining shallow tub with the contents of a half-dozen cream containers scrounged from the coffee room, then he reached under his jacket and pulled out a sodden little ball of gray and black fur. He set it down on the desk by the truncated cup.

“What in the hell is that?” I asked.

Tad turned, startled. He looked like a kid caught with a pocketful of the next-door neighbor’s apples. He grinned sheepishly at me.

“It’s a cat,” he said. “Poor little thing’s starving.”

I stepped around him to get a closer look. The little grunge ball on the desk might have been a kitten, but it looked more like a half-drowned rat. It was barely half-grown, and it was the scrawniest damned thing I’ve ever seen in my life. It crouched on the desk, face plunged into the cup, little pink tongue making short work of the cream. Its gray and black fur, sticking out in spikes, looked moth-eaten and couldn’t disguise the sharp ridge of its shoulder blades. A sad little apology for a tail lay limp on the desk, half curled around the dirty paws. It finished the cream, nearly knocking over the cup trying to get the last drop.

Tad pulled another handful of cream containers from his jacket pocket. The kitten watched with rigid intensity as he refilled the empty



cup. It looked up at him, as if asking permission to continue. Tad grinned and nudged the bony little bottom, urging the cat closer to the cup. It didn't need a second invitation.

"I found him in the hangar," Tad said. He scratched the scraggly gray fur behind the cat's ear. The ear flicked, and the cat made a quick, rusty buzzing sound, but remained devoted to the task at hand.

The cat finished the last of the cream and sat up straight on the desk, front paws placed neatly together, afterthought of a tail wrapped around the paws with an air of incongruous dignity. It looked up at me. Its eyes were a deep, vivid shade of blue, clear as mountain lakes under an autumn sky.

I took a closer look at it, and realized suddenly that it wasn't a gray and black cat. It was merely covered in grease and oil. So not only scrawny, but filthy, too.

As if in response, the cat lifted one paw and licked it, then smoothed the grimy paw across the side of its cheek. It didn't seem to do much good.

"He's white, I think." Tad picked it up. "Give him a bath, put a little meat on his bones, and he'll be a real pretty little thing." The kitten nestled into the crook of his arm and began purring, producing enough volume to vibrate its fur. Its whole body trembled in ecstasy as it kneaded the inside of Tad's elbow. Tad grinned and glanced up at me sideways, like a little kid. "I thought we might keep him."

"Keep it?" I said. "Like take it with us? Not a chance, kid." I placed my index finger firmly on his chest for emphasis. "I'm not having a cat on my airplane."

"C'mon, Lucy," he said. "He doesn't weigh much more than half a pound or so. He'll sleep most of the way home. If we leave him here, he'll starve."

Still purring, the cat looked up at me. I don't like cats. They're entirely too self-centred and arrogant for me. I get the impression they believe human beings are too far beneath them to notice—except of course when it's time for dinner.

"You'll hardly know he's there," Tad said. "Besides, every airplane needs a cat."

I raised an eyebrow. Tad had a quick and slightly off center imagination. Justifying that last comment might take all of it. "It does, huh?"

"Sure. You know. Cat and duck method of IFR flight."

"Cat and—?" Then I recognized the old joke. If all the gyros failed in the clouds, the cat, having its own internal gyros and always landing on its feet, would show the pilot how to keep the wings level. As for the

duck—ducks always land safely, so the pilot just tossed it out the window and followed it down. Another one of those ideas that work far better in theory than in practice.

“Yeah, right,” I said. He raised his eyebrows and smiled at me in that way he has, and he knows I have a hard time resisting. I sighed, defeated. “Well, okay, then. But if that thing makes a mess in my airplane, you’re cleaning it up.”

“I’ll get a box and some newspaper.” He grinned and scratched the cat’s ears again. “Besides, white cats are good luck. They’re the special children of Bast.”

“Bast?”

“Yeah. The Egyptian cat goddess. Or they’re returned spirits. Or they’re familiars of white witches. Pick whatever legend you want.”

“I’ll leave the legends to you. Go check the weather again, and do the walk around. I’ll meet you at the airplane in about twenty minutes.”

The cat chose that moment to leap out of Tad’s arms. Still purring like a finely tuned Pratt & Whitney PT6 engine, it wove itself around my ankles, leaning well into the turns like a good pilot, and flowing like liquid around my feet. It gave me an oddly pleasant sensation in my chest, and I nearly reached down to scratch its ears.

“Let’s go do as the lady says, Cat.” Tad scooped up the cat and hoisted it to his shoulder. Cat crouched there, his tiny claws deep in the fabric of Tad’s jacket. He looked determined to hang on, settling in for the duration.

WE HAD FLIGHT-PLANNED FOR A TRIP OF A LITTLE UNDER THREE HOURS. DURING THE day, in clear weather, the scenery was spectacular over the mountains. At night, in cloud, it always made me feel a bit edgy. We’d be flying at ten thousand feet. Our route gave us fifty miles horizontal distance from peaks stretching up to over twelve thousand feet. I trusted the radio nav aids to keep us on course and well away from all that vertical real estate to either side. That’s a lot of trust to put in a bunch of electronic gadgets. The pilots’ term for mountain peaks hidden in cloud was *cumulo-granite*. Hitting one could ruin your whole day.

*Is that what happened to you, Seth?*

I let the thought go and strapped myself into the left seat, settling my headset over my ears. With Cat still clinging to his shoulder, Tad read the items off the checklist. I had started the Twin Otter often enough so that I could do it in my sleep, but company policy insisted on following the checklist religiously. It was a good procedure. Habit was unreliable, a fact proven too many times when pilots accidentally took off with incorrect

flap settings, or fuel selectors sitting blithely on empty tanks.

The engines started smoothly, all the engine gauges sitting firmly in the green. Tad set all the communication and navigation radios as I taxied to the end of the runway. He announced our intention to take off. Nothing disturbed the slight hiss of static in my headset to indicate conflicting traffic. Even as I reached up to advance the throttles, I craned forward to take a good look around the sky, searching for red and green navigation lights. Some aircraft still went around with no radios. Nordo, we called them. Perfectly legal, but they could cause a nasty shock if you didn't check for them. The sky seemed clear so we moved out onto the threshold of the runway and I pushed the throttles forward for full power.

Six hundred feet off the deck, we were in the cloud. The cat on Tad's shoulder watched me with great interest as I attended to all the routine little chores to ensure a smooth climb to altitude. I turned to reach up over my shoulder for the switch to test all the warning lights once more, and caught Cat looking at me again, his blue, blue eyes narrowed to slits. For a second, I could have sworn he grinned at me in approval. Then he closed his eyes and settled into a scruffy little ball. His purr was a warmly comforting sound in the cockpit.

WE HIT THE TURBULENCE AN HOUR-AND-A-HALF INTO THE FLIGHT. IT STARTED OUT AS mild chop, not much worse than driving an old stiff-suspensioned pickup over a washboarded country road. Tad and I tightened our seatbelts. Cat sat up and yawned, then began washing with elaborate nonchalance. He didn't make much headway against the grease and oil staining his fur. All he succeeded in doing was spreading the stuff in a thinner layer over a wider area.

A bolt of lightning lit the sky with eerie blue light. At the same time, the airplane dropped five hundred feet like an express elevator heading for the basement. Maps, pens and flashlights hung in the air for a second, weightless, then showered down onto my shoulder and arm. It felt like slamming into concrete when we hit the bottom of the downdraft. The next second, the Tw'otter lurched sideways to the left, tilting the wings nearly perpendicular to the ground.

"Get that wing up," I shouted, grabbing the yoke with both hands. My foot shoved the right rudder pedal all the way to the floor. I felt Tad's foot hit his pedal an instant after I stomped mine. It took both of us to wrestle the aircraft back to wings level.

An updraft caught us. The force of it pushed my head down against my shoulders, made my feet too heavy to stay on the rudder pedals. The

nose pitched up and the left wing came up, pointing straight at the sky. The attitude indicator in front of me toppled, making it completely useless as a reference for keeping the wings level. Something in the cabin behind us creaked alarmingly.

The airspeed indicator unwound like a broken spring. In about three seconds, the Tw'otter was going to stall and snap off into a spin, then fall out of the sky like a broken duck. I pushed forward on the column with all my strength. Tad jammed the right rudder pedal all the way to the floor. The airplane shuddered and trembled, but the nose came down and the wings levelled.

For a moment, we flew straight and level. I wiped the sweat from my forehead and glanced at Tad. He was as pale as I felt, both of us sweating and a bit breathless. Cat clung to his shoulder with the claws on all four feet dug in deeply, pupils black and round inside a ring of vivid blue, showing no sign of the panic I expected. He was uncannily calm, his small body swaying easily and automatically to compensate for the jerky movement of Tad's shoulder with the turbulence, spindly little tail acting as a rudder.

The sky lit again with another flash of lightning. Blue, twisting ropes of electric fire danced around the nose of the aircraft, coiling and tangling around the wings and the engines, lacing through the prop arcs like streams of molten sapphire. The burst of static in my headset nearly deafened me. It lasted only an instant, then was gone, leaving not so much as the hiss of a carrier wave. The cockpit lighting went out.

I snapped on the feeble, battery-powered overhead light, then reached for the flashlight, fingers scrabbling on the deck by my feet. The Tw'otter lurched again, nose down to the right this time. I found the flashlight, but didn't have time to turn it on. Tad shouted something, wrestling with the yoke and rudder pedals. I grabbed the yoke. We pulled back, struggling to bring the wings level and the nose up. The g-force pinned me down in my seat. It took all my strength to raise my arm and pull the throttles back.

A deep, shuddering thump wracked the airframe. For one heart-stopping second the control yoke went limp in my hands. Then the wings came level. Between us, Tad and I managed to get the nose up and keep the aircraft more or less straight. But we could do nothing about the altitude. The turbulence tossed us about like a cork in white-water rapids.

I watched the airspeed indicator in horrified fascination. The needle blurred around the face of the instrument, bouncing back and forth between forty knots and two hundred knots too quickly to see. The Twin Otter should have been falling out of the sky in a dead stall. Or break-

ing up into small pieces. Incredibly, it did neither. I didn't have time to wonder about it. Besides, it doesn't pay to question miracles.

Then, without warning, we were out of the turbulence and into calm air. Stunned, Tad and I sat there, staring at each other in the dim light. I switched on the flashlight. Both of the gyros—attitude indicator and heading indicator—were still toppled and useless, struggling to erect themselves. The turn coordinator, an electric gyro, still worked. Automatically, I glanced up at the magnetic compass. Something hard must have hit it, perhaps the flashlight as it sailed through the air. The glass bowl was shattered, the clear kerosene spilled away onto the deck. The compass card swung aimlessly, tilted drunkenly to the right.

A cold chill rippled down my spine. We were in the middle of the mountains at eight thousand three hundred feet in the clouds, with no reliable way of knowing which direction we were going. All around us, peaks soared to twelve thousand feet. Both the navigation and the communications radios were dead. We had no way of telling where the peaks were.

"Can we climb?" Tad asked, his voice loud in the silence.

The yoke still felt strange—loose and spongy, as if something had snapped between it and the elevator. When I reached up to push the throttles forward, a bone-deep shudder wracked the aircraft. The airspeed fell off alarmingly and the right wing threatened to drop. Hastily, I shoved the nose down and pulled back the throttles.

"Feels as if we damaged something back in the tail," I said. "It's not going to climb."

He looked ahead through the windscreen at the ghostly gray emptiness out there. He grinned wryly. "Wonder how long it will be before we hit something."

The question needed no answer, but I nodded in acknowledgment. *Would it be so bad? Would it bring Seth and me together again?*

Cat made a soft little noise, not quite a miaow, not quite a growl. The raspy little chirrup sounded strangely like a question. He leaped from Tad's shoulder onto the top of the glareshield, then paced the length of it until he was in front of me. He turned to look back over his shoulder. Those blue eyes stared directly into mine for a moment, mesmerizing me. I couldn't look away.

Finally, he walked back to the centre of the glareshield and sat down, peering intently through the windscreen. Tad and I exchanged glances. Tad shrugged.

Cat sat there quietly for several minutes. Suddenly he sprang to his feet, scrawny little body hunched into a scruffy little arch. His fur stuck

out in oily spikes and he hissed and spat, glaring to the right.

I looked past Tad, out the right window. I saw nothing, but on sudden impulse, I twisted the yoke to the left.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" Tad whispered in awe.

I glanced to the right just in time to see the ghost of something pale and solid slide past the up-tilted right wing. My heart tried to leap right out of my chest through my throat.

Cat resumed his seat in the centre of the glareshield, again peering forward.

Tad looked at me, pale as the granite wall we had just missed. "I don't believe that," he said.

Cat looked back over his shoulder at me. I could swear he grinned before he turned his attention back to the sweeping banks of swirling cloud beyond the windscreen. A moment later, he bounced up, hissing and spitting, scowling out the right side window again.

"This is ridiculous," I muttered. But I didn't hesitate to turn to the left. I didn't see anything out the window this time. Cat resumed his seat.

"What was the weather to the west of the mountains?" I asked, more for something normal to say than with any hope we'd actually make it that far.

Tad retrieved his clipboard and glanced at his notes. "Ten thousand thin scattered, and there should be a full moon."

"Good VFR, then," I said absently, watching Cat.

Cat got to his feet and casually walked to my side of the glareshield. He looked at me calmly, then put up a paw to touch the windscreen post. His eyes looked like mountain lakes. Seth's eyes were that color. Cat blinked.

I banked slightly to the left. Cat sat there for another moment, then walked back to the centre. I levelled the wings. He lay down and began purring.

This couldn't be happening, could it? I couldn't be sitting here, flying an airplane under the direction of a small, scraggly white cat. Things like this just aren't for real, are they? Maybe we had hit a mountain, and we were all dead and just didn't know it yet.

"Don't question miracles," I muttered under my breath. Tad gave me a lop-sided grin and nodded his agreement.

Twenty minutes later, we burst out into clear air. Below us, the mountains fell off sharply into rolling foothills. The moon turned the landscape to pale silver. Ahead, the lights of a town glimmered and sparkled against the shadowy trees. Cat yawned mightily, then curled up and went to sleep on the glareshield.





THE ENGINEER CAME INTO THE OFFICE, SHAKING HIS HEAD. HE FLOPPED INTO A chair opposite the leather couch where Tad and I sat, cradling cups of hot coffee in hands that still trembled slightly. Cat sat primly on the low table in front of the couch, scruffy little tail wrapped around his paws.

"You two had a whole squadron of guardian angels working overtime for you tonight," the engineer said. "The right wing is twisted a couple of degrees off true, and there's eight rivets popped in the tail. There ain't one electric working in the whole airplane. With luck like that..." He shook his head again, then got to his feet. "Well, you made a lot of work for me. I better get started."

Cat stood up and stretched. As the engineer left, Cat leaped from the table to my knee, then onto my shoulder. He settled into a small curl against the side of my throat, and the comforting rumble of his purr vibrated against my skin.

Tad looked at Cat for a long moment, then met my gaze and grinned. "You've been adopted," he said. "I'd say you've got yourself a cat."

"He's your cat," I said, but made no move to dislodge the furry little bundle.

Tad laughed softly. "You sure don't know much about cats," he said. "He's made up his mind that you're his people. You can't argue with that."

I reached up and scratched Cat's ear, remembering Tad's words. White cats are returned spirits. I smiled, still stroking the oily white fur. Suddenly, I didn't feel so achingly alone anymore. •

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*He traveled alone with his pack and  
hunted a dangerous sort of prey:  
creatures of shadow, of magic, of  
deviltry...*

# Hounds and Moonlight

Harry James Connolly

THEY CAME OVER THE HILL WITHOUT A SOUND, MERE SILHOUETTES in the slanting rays of the fading day. Kama was digging a new toilet behind the house when she saw them: a lone man, tall and lean, and his hunting dogs.

They walked toward the village, unhurried and unconcerned with their welcome. Kama set her foot against the spade and continued her work. Let the others rush out of doors to examine the stranger. She had work.

One of the village dogs began to bark, and soon others joined the chorus. Folks began poking their heads out of their houses. Ameez stepped out of the kitchen, wiping his bloody hands on his apron.

"What's that?" he said.

"Don't know," Kama replied.

"You got eyes, don't you?" Ameez said. "What do you see?" Kama flinched as he approached her.

"One man, many dogs," Kama said.

Ameez grunted. "The only dogs I hear are Wilkutt's ratting hounds."

Kama shrugged. Let him call her a liar. It didn't matter. The stranger

would soon be close enough for him to see for himself, watery eyes and all.

It was strange that the hunting dogs would offer no response to the howling of the village mutts. Dogs are territorial, and challenge each other as a matter of course. Why didn't these new dogs answer?

People filed out of their homes to get a look at the stranger. Ameez scowled, as though Kama herself had caused all this trouble. He, too, started walking toward the road. Kama followed at a suitable distance.

Touru, Wilkutt's wife, slapped his rat-hunting dogs with a paddle to quiet them, and Kama could hear the frightened whinnies of the horses in the village stable. Two men went to look after them. Kama couldn't tell who they were in the gathering darkness.

"We heard you were somewhere along the coast," Wilkutt was saying. "We've been sending word with the caravans." Three of the stranger's hounds sat by his legs while several more stood behind him. Wilkutt bent to stroke one of them.

"Don't touch the dogs," the stranger said. Wilkutt straightened and stepped back. "They're dangerous. You have a werewolf?"

"We think so," Wilkutt said.

Ameez snorted. He didn't think anything of the sort, but would never admit it in front of a stranger. He didn't trust anyone outside the village, and few inside as well.

Wilkutt pretended he wasn't there. "Have you hunted his kind before?"

"We have."

Suddenly Kama understood who he was. This man was the center of many tales told by the trading caravans. He traveled alone with his pack and hunted a dangerous sort of prey: creatures of shadow, of magic, of devilry.

The twilight sky grew darker, and Kama strained to see his face. It was no use; there was too little light.

"Anyway," Wilkutt said, "we can make up a bed for you in our home, if you like. We have plenty of space, now that the werewolf has taken our Willub."

"No," the stranger answered, "I'll sleep in the field with my pack. If you have any bread, cheese or milk, I'd welcome it. I've eaten nothing but meat and roots for a tenday."

He walked away without waiting for a response, his dogs trotting silently before and behind him. The starlight on their backs made them look like serpents gliding through the dark.

Wilkutt shrugged before retreating to his house. Ameez turned to Kama, and the young woman knew the expression on his face without need of any light at all. He clutched her arm and dragged her into the house.

"How dare you!" Ameez hissed. "How dare you stare at him like a starving beast! You won't run away with some man and shame me the way your sister did, you ugly brute. You wretched animal! Why did I ever take you in!" Ameez grabbed his leather strap off the chopping block and struck Kama across the legs.

Kama screamed and ducked behind the fireplace chair. Ameez followed, but Kama held the chair back between them.

"How dare you threaten me with my own furniture!"

A few tactics could end one of Ameez's whippings: screaming was one, since he was sometimes ashamed to let the neighbors know how often he beat her. Running and dodging was another. But usually nothing stopped a beating except the weariness of his right arm.

"You'd like to hit me with that chair, wouldn't you? You'd kill me to get what's mine! My house!" Ameez shoved the chair aside and began to swing the strap. Kama curled up on the floor, and waited for it to end.

Ameez tired quickly, and threw the strap angrily onto the block. "See what you made me do?" he said, gasping for air. "You're my wife! You should know better than throw yourself at a strange man!"

Kama scrambled out of the house on all fours. Ameez didn't chase her, but she could hear his labored breathing. If only Ameez's heart would seize and kill him, Kama could finally be happy. She knew she was ugly, knew she was a brute, knew she was trapped with the only man who would have her, but he didn't have to keep *saying* it.

Kama walked toward the fields where the hunter camped. She had nowhere else to go and she was curious about him. She had heard so many contradictory tales that she couldn't even be sure of his name, let alone his habits. Some men said he charged a fistful of gold and a trio of virgins for his services, while others said he asked for nothing. Some tales described him as an old man, while some said he was an ageless, unchanging boy. Some said he was a wizard that called to dogs the way spring calls to flowers, and some said there were no true dogs or men in this pack, that they were all shapechangers who took turns playing human.

Maybe she would learn the truth. Maybe he would sic his hounds on her and take her life away.

She heard scuffling footsteps approaching along the road. Touru, barely visible in the starlight, topped the hill and walked past without a sideways glance. Had Wilkutt sent his wife alone to deliver bread and cheese to a strange man, or had it been her idea?

Kama saw a campfire burning a little ways off the road. She walked toward it, and she could feel *things* moving in the darkness near her. The dogs, she assumed. She heard nothing but the hush of the wind and the

crackle of the fire. Her body still burned from her last beating.

The stranger looked up at her. "I said I don't want a woman."

She calmly strolled up to the man and kicked him.

He grunted and rolled onto his side. The loaf of pan bread he was eating fell into the grass. Immediately, half a dozen hounds appeared out of the darkness, surrounding her. They were sleek and powerful, with eyes as black as grave dirt. None of the animals showed their teeth, but they didn't have to. Kama closed her eyes and waited for the end to come.

It didn't. Instead, the man leapt to his feet and bowed. "Forgive me, madam. I have lived so long among animals that I have forgotten my manners."

"No need for that 'Madam' stuff," Kama said, secretly pleased. "Just offer me a seat and introduce yourself."

"My name is Jebul." An ordinary enough name, for such an unusual man. He insisted she sit where he had been sitting. It was only a rock, but it was more courtesy than anyone had shown her in years. They shared Touru's pan bread. Kama had lived across the road from Touru and Wilkutt for most of her life, but had never tasted their food until it was offered by a stranger.

They said nothing more until the moon had risen. She spent many quiet minutes studying the man's face by the firelight. He was ugly, just as she was. His face was crooked and his nose long and pointed. Hope unaccountably blossomed in Kama's heart.

The moon was high when Jebul spoke next. "This boy Willub," he said, "can you show me his grave?"

"Yes." Kama stood and led him across the field. The dogs followed, ranging around them as a kind of honor guard. There couldn't have been more than fifteen of the beasts. Could fifteen dogs kill a werewolf? Or was there something special about this ugly man with the common name?

It was a clear night, and the moon was full. She found Willub's cairn easily. "Here."

Three of the hounds circled the grave, sniffing at the stones. They lost interest almost immediately, wandering around the cemetery, searching for more interesting scents.

"Did you see the body?" Jebul asked.

"I did. He was torn open from his shoulder blades to his buttocks."

"From behind? No werewolf killed this boy. A rock tiger, more likely. Werewolves attack from the front, so they can see their victim's eyes. They eat the fear."

Kama shrugged. It was Wilkutt's idea that there was something unusual about his son's death, and he should spread word through the caravans.

Ordinary tragedy wasn't good enough for him.

One of the hounds walked to Jebul and huffed twice. It was a strange sound, as though it was speaking to him.

"I'm sorry," Kama said, watching the dog as it walked away. "To drag you out here to this wide spot in the road..."

"Come with me," he said and followed the dog.

They walked through the graveyard, circling the cairns and emerging into a flat, unplanted meadow. Half a dozen hounds circled a lonely grave at the edge of the forest. They sniffed excitedly at the stones.

"Who is buried here?" Jebul asked. The dogs began rolling back the river rocks with their paws.

"A young boy," Kama replied. "The last caravan paused here a while, and one of their children caught a wasting disease and died. Wilkutt and the others made them bury him way out here, to keep the disease far from the bodies of their relatives."

"He was fine before he came here? When he died, was he pale? Bloodless?"

"Do you think something drank his blood?"

"There are a dozen creatures that suckle human blood. Did the boy have any cuts on his body when he died?"

"All boys have cuts. His teeth did turn black, though."

Jebul nodded. "I know what that is." He knelt beside one of the dogs and patted the grave, then stood and walked back toward the camp. "The world is full of strange things, but most people don't recognize their handiwork. They blame the deaths on wasting disease or bear attack."

The dogs swirled around them, stepping into Jebul's path, then bolting toward the grave. Kama thought they were irritated that Jebul didn't take up the hunt immediately. "So then," she said, "what killed the boy?"

The stranger looked at her. "After I've slept, I'll be leaving. Tell the mother and father whatever you like."

He walked back to the fire, and Kama watched him go. She knew when she was being dismissed. One of the dogs loitered near her as the others trotted across the field. It stared at her, with its head straight and its body tense. Kama knew it was studying her, but it didn't tilt its head as most dogs did when they were curious, and it didn't step close enough to smell her. In fact, none of Jebul's hunting dogs had tried to smell her.

She walked back to the village, thinking about the evening she'd just spent. Jebul and his pack traveled the world. They were famous from mountain to coast. And if it was dangerous life, so what? There were worse deaths than having the blood drained from your body or being mauled from the front and having your fear eaten. There was the slow



whipping of insults and the leather strap.

Kama could see into Ameez's house as she approached; he had not closed the door. He sat by the fireplace, drinking ditch whiskey from a jug. Kama stared into the house, suddenly unable to imagine going in there again. So what if she was too old and too ugly to find a better husband? She didn't have to spend her years caring for that old beggar. She'd rather disappear onto the road and never be seen again.

Kama stood in the darkness for most of the night. Ameez slowly emptied the jug and slumped in his chair. Finally, he was snoring and slobbering onto his chin.

Kama entered the house and went to her cot. She packed a few keepsakes and a good knife, and threw her mother's otter-skin cloak over her shoulders. Ameez snored like a rooting hog, and Kama went to the kitchen and stole a skillet, hatchet and another knife. She went to the door, expecting to never see the place again.

She couldn't leave. Running away would do nothing for her anger, or her hatred. It wasn't enough.

She slammed the skillet against the side of Ameez's head, then dragged him outside and bled him like a pig into the latrine. He died without a sound.

Kama walked into the night, calmly, slowly, her bag stuffed with loaves of Ameez's pan bread and sticks of dried sausage. She would have burned down the house if she had thought it would not rouse the rest of the village. As it was, eastern sky was glowing with the imminent sunrise.

She found Jebul rolling up his blanket. His dogs sat in a circle, watching him impatiently. Kama began kicking dirt on the dying embers of the campfire.

"Don't try to follow, madam, if that's what you have in mind. The dogs won't allow it." In the daylight she could see that he was even uglier than she'd thought. His cheeks were pockmarked and his teeth were crooked. He was at least twice Kama's age.

"Who is master here," Kama replied, "you or them?"

Jebul did not answer, and Kama followed his cue. She was silent when he was. She walked where he did.

The hounds led, following their noses into the forest. There were a baker's dozen of them, all with oily black fur and flinty, intelligent eyes.

A pair of them blocked her path as she was about to follow them into the trees. They bared their teeth and growled.

"They won't warn you twice," Jebul said. But even as he spoke, a third hound, slightly larger than the rest, approached. It huffed at them, and they, with a reluctant backward glance, went into the forest. Jebul

followed them.

The larger dog regarded Kama. She saw a long scar on one side of its face, and one of its eyes was milky white. It stood and stared just as the dog had stared the previous night. Perhaps they were the same. It turned and went into the forest, moving slowly enough for her to follow.

She walked beside Jebul all day, although he pretended she was not there. The dogs swarmed around them like a school of fish. They had a strange beauty about them, and seemed to have a *knowingness* that Kama found disconcerting. At midday, they laid fruits and edible roots at Jebul's feet, and at sunset they gathered at a likely campsite and waited while he opened his pack.

Sitting in the darkness beside the fire, Kama offered Jebul a loaf of pan bread, which he eagerly accepted. "So," she said, "what killed that boy?" He gave no answer. "Damn you, sir, you will not eat my food and then ignore me. What killed that boy?"

Jebul stared at the bread, then shrugged and tore off another piece. "When elves become ill or injured, they cure themselves by drinking human blood. And they have an aura that will turn a man's bones and teeth black."

"The boy's been dead more than a month and his killer long fled. How long do you think this hunt will last?"

"Hard to say. This river valley is not widely settled, is it?"

"No. There are two bridges across the river, and two roads that lead to them. The caravans stick to the roads, and there is much dark forest and swamp between."

"The elf will stay close to the road. They take much blood for their curing." He picked at the bread crust thoughtfully. "I wonder..." Kama waited for him to continue. "Have you heard of an elf city in the valley? For years I've heard tales of a hidden elf city somewhere west of the desert." Kama shook her head.

That night she slept beneath the stars for the first time in her life. Several times she woke up to hear the hounds moving about in the darkness, and in the morning she woke with the realization that she was a fugitive killer, and she felt utterly calm and free.

Kama shared another loaf with Jebul and she offered pieces of sausage to the dogs. They were surprised by this, and when they smelled the meat they jerked their heads away. But the scarred hound stared at her while she rolled up her blanket and kicked dirt over the embers.

They set out on the trail again. The summer fires had burned away the underbrush only a tenday before, but the dogs moved as if they were confident of the scent.

She watched them throughout the day. When the sun was high, the animals left roots for them at the edge of a clearing.

"They're good at this," she said.

"They've had a lot a practice."

"How much?"

The dogs appeared around them. They were silent, still, and captivating. Scar blocked Jebul's path and stared until the hunter sighed and dropped his pack.

"The elf is near, and hunting." He reached into the bag and drew out a scarlet cloak. The hounds melted into the forest. "My father started these hunts when I was just a boy. There were twenty-one hounds then, a good number. One night they tracked down a merman who'd been raiding the town's silos. The dogs killed it and tore it apart, and after they'd eaten, they were different. Powerful.

"The townspeople began to hire him to hunt down other things. Vampires, wights, even a lamia or two. Soon my older brothers were running the farm, and my father spent all his time in the wilderness with the hounds. Until the day they came back without him.

"My eldest brother went with them next, and he disappeared. Then the last brother, besides me. By then I was old enough to understand. I sold the farm and waited until the pack returned for me."

"Which they did."

"They are unlike other dogs. They have taken power from the flesh of the creatures they kill. Some of that power they retain and some slips away over time. They keep hunting to replace the magic they lose."

One of the dogs gripped Kama's sleeve in its teeth and pulled. She ducked behind a fallen tree and peeked toward the clearing. Jebul looked back at her, his face full of helpless fear, and Kama suddenly understood that he was not the master of this pack; he was its human face, and the bait in its trap.

Jebul stepped into the clearing. He looked from side to side and scanned the tree tops. He walked forward reluctantly. In his red cloak, he looked like an archery target. Kama couldn't see the dogs anywhere.

Jebul looked over his shoulder again, and suddenly the elf was beside him. Jebul stepped back, but the creature grabbed his wrist so quickly Kama didn't see it move.

The elf was a marvel. It was at least a head taller than Jebul, and as slender as a praying mantis. It wore nothing more than a knife, and Kama was shocked to see its tiny genitals dangling in the sunlight. Its ears stretched up and back like the horns of a goat and its skin was tinged with blue. It grabbed Jebul by the jaw and bared his neck. Its teeth looked like

a fistful of needles.

It bent forward, and the air was suddenly full of streaking shadows. In the time it took Kama to blink, the elf lay on the ground with two hounds gripping each of its limbs and others tearing at its throat and genitals.

Kama ran into the clearing. It had all happened so fast. She had almost seen something amazing, something magical... The elf's head was tilted back, and its mouthful of spiked teeth gave Kama a chill.

One of the dogs looked up at her and growled, gore dripping from its mouth.

"They won't let you near it," Jebul said. He knelt beside a tree, hurriedly rolling his cloak into a ball. "It's their kill." The cloak slipped from his fingers, and Jebul held up his hands. They trembled.

A dog whined, and Kama turned back to the kill. One of the hounds lay on its side, breathing heavily. Kama edged toward it and saw the silver knife sticking out of its belly and its milky white eye. It was Scar.

Two of the dogs dropped chunks of elf meat in front of Scar, which the wounded hound gulped down whole. Another dog gripped the knife in its teeth and gingerly slid it free. Blood splashed onto the grass.

Scar was dying. Despite its power and its elvish food, it was going to die.

Kama drew her knife and approached the hound. The other dogs growled and flattened their ears, but she ignored them. Ameez should not have called her an animal; animals were beautiful. Kama laid the blade against her forearm.

"What are you doing?" Jebul asked. She drew the knife across her skin and let it fall into the dirt. The cut didn't hurt nearly as much as one of Ameez's whippings.

"What are you doing?" Jebul shouted, his voice becoming shrill. Kama held her bloody cut before Scar's nose, and the dog laid its burning hot tongue against it.

"Stop!" Jebul said, "You don't understand what I've been doing here, what I've been doing for most of my life. These animals...they aren't natural anymore. They're monstrous. For years I've been searching for something too powerful for them to kill."

Scar rolled onto his feet. The blood only trickled from its wounded gut. It lapped at Kama's arm, drinking down her blood, and its flint-black eye stared up at her.

"Please," Jebul said. "Please don't save its life. Not when I've been trying to kill them for so lo—"

Kama heard a sudden rushing sound behind her, and Jebul was cut off in mid-breath. She heard something tear, and Jebul was silent. She didn't care. She had killed her master, too. Scar lapped at her arm, drinking her

blood, scorching her with his hot tongue.

Finally, the hound stood, and backed away from her under his own power. The pack backed away from their kill. Kama could see the pale, torn flesh and pink elvish blood a few feet away.

The dogs were watching her. They were beautiful, every one, and she loved them from the bottom of her soul. Could she become the thing Ameez had called her? Could she dare hope for so much?

She crawled to the elf's body on her hands and knees, bent her head to its flesh, and began to feed. •



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*"Women was put on this Earth to bear fruit, child! Ain't nobody's fault but your own if'n that fruit is bitter!"*

# Pearlie Little

Randy D. Ashburn

THE BURLAP SACK SMACKED THE TABLE WITH A WET THUMP, and even though Mama had thrown it herself, the look in her eye told Pearlie *she'd* get the blame for the red mess oozing towards the supper plates. Pearlie's stomach clenched, sending barbed wire shivers through the willowy thirteen-year-old.

"Mind you, none of that, now!" Mama said, shaking her head fiercely. "Pain's there to remind a girl of the *sin* what brought it on. It's all just part of learning to take responsibility."

"Yes, ma'am." Best to do as Mama said. Even the angry fist twisting inside her belly hadn't tempted Pearlie to budge from the kitchen table since Mama'd left a couple hours back. On the other hand, it didn't stop her from picking secretly at the flaked paint on the old gray chair as she laid her head back to stare at the rotted crossbeams above. The brutal Appalachian sun broiled the ramshackle collection of boards they called a home, stinging her nostrils with the tang of old timbers basting in bird dung.

Mama glanced up from the herbs she'd been sorting since her return. "Seen your papa today?"

Pearlie shook her head.



"I swear, that man's always down to the creek. If folks didn't know no better they'd think he cared more for fishing than—" Mama's head jerked up and her eyes darted around. Eventually, they settled on Pearlie and a smile slid back onto her spider web thin lips. "Well, more than he cares about *you*, in any event."

Pearlie looked at her bare feet, brown as shoe leather from dirt and sun. They were so dark, in fact, that even she could hardly make out the tiny spots of blood that'd dribbled down her legs onto them.

"All for the best, I suppose," Mama said. "If he knowed what you went and done last night, no telling what'd happen next."

Pearlie closed her eyes and imagined she was in some far off city-world—the kind with paved streets chock full of clean people hurrying towards big, important lives in shiny glass towers. But when she opened them again, she was still at the top of that same treeless hill where she'd been born. Mama'd insisted Papa build there, so she could take her rightful place in the community—sitting nearest the Lord. There was no need for that, really. *Everybody* in those parts knew where Mama belonged.

The kettle screamed over the fire.

Mama emptied the purple-green mash from her pestle into a tin cup, poured boiling water over it, and thrust the steaming brew into Pearlie's hand. It scorched the girl's fingers, and the bitter stench was so strong, her slender skull buzzed like it was full of mud daubers.

Mama's eyes narrowed. "Go on now, child. Works best when it's still hot."

The fiery sludge clawed down her throat, then turned around and tried to fight its way back up again, forcing Pearlie to cough and sputter.

"Don't you worry none, child. That's *good* medicine—not like the poison you'd get from that old hag, Hazel Grubbs."

Pearlie's eyes went wide, which only made Mama's grin stretch further.

"Oh, yessiree, missy, you better bet I knows *all* about it. Only took one gander at you staggering home this morning, and I knowed where you'd been."

Pearlie's tiny hands wandered into her lap, as if to hide the aching in her hollow belly.

Mama leaned close, her pale face blotting out the world. "Ain't but one *abortionist* in these parts, child, and the good Lord and I both knows her name!"

At least with Mama filling up her vision, there was no chance of the girl's eyes straying guiltily to the damp sack on the table, where she feared she might recognize a tiny, half-formed shape swathed in thick burlap.

"Damn that baby-killing Grubbs woman for turning my little girl away from *Sweet Jesus*." Mama closed her eyes and shuddered at The Name, then held out a brown poultice that reeked so bad Pearlie's eyes watered. "This'll soothe the body from what you and that witch put it through." She bent over like she was actually planning to put it on. "But the aches inside can't be reached so easy, I'm afeared." From the light that sprang into Mama's eyes you'd almost believe that the idea really had just come to her. "Now, if you was to let the Lord back into your heart, why, worthless, baby-killing sinner though you are, *He* could salve that wound you and Hazel Grubbs put on your soul."

Best to please Mama. Pearlie struggled to her knees, though the pain was torture.

The woman smiled and laid her hand on Pearlie's grungy blonde hair, the other one raising the stinking poultice up towards the hole-riddled ceiling like an offering.

"Oh Lord, forgive this sinner, for she is but a child who was led astray by wicked servants of Satan."

Mama shot a hard eye down at her, so Pearlie nodded quickly, hoping she'd get the soothing poultice soon.

"But I know, *Jesus*—" Pearlie studied the dusty floorboards, not wanting to notice how Mama was *too much* in rapture. "I know that You demand a sinner come with a pure and open heart." She cupped her hand roughly under the girl's chin, and yanked her head so far towards heaven that Pearlie was sure her neck would snap clean in two. "To show this tainted daughter of Eve truly repents, she'll confess the name of that *other* sinner what done brought her to the devil-woman, Hazel Grubbs." Mama's eyes fell on her like comets. "Tell Him, child. Tell the Lord the name of the father of that baby you done butchered."

But the only sound Pearlie made was a ragged gulp, like swallowing a fistful of razorblades.

Mama threw the poultice onto the filthy floor and ground it under her heel. "If you've no desire to soothe your soul, child, there's no sense in me wasting time tending your flesh." She pointed towards the kitchen table. "Fetch that sack down to the root cellar. I've got the Lord's Work to do today."

Pearlie stumbled over and grasped the bag in her small, trembling hands. The round lump inside was as big as a good-sized melon—thankfully, far *too* big to be what she'd first feared. She shifted it in her arms to find a better grip, away from the sticky dampness seeping through the itchy burlap. But her hand brushed across something inside the bag that made her gasp and fall to the floor as slowly as if she was sinking though

molasses.

Something that felt for all the world like the long, crooked nose of Hazel Grubbs.

MAMA'S FACE SWAM SLOWLY INTO FOCUS, LOOMING ABOVE PEARLIE LIKE A Hunters' Moon. "Always suspected you was made of sterner stuff, child." She adjusted the poultice and drizzled foul, green fluid onto Pearl's forehead. "Guess sin saps all the vinegar right out of a person, don't it?"

Lying on her back as limp as one of Sarah Parson's rag dolls, there was little more the girl could do but nod dutifully. At least the knives that stabbed at her belly had been dulled considerably by Mama's medicines.

Beeswax candles flickered to either side of Pearl's head, so close that if she turned too far either way her dry, stringy hair would surely catch fire. She didn't need to look around to know where she was, anyway—the cool, slimy air told her all she needed to know.

She was on that huge oak table in the root cellar. Hiding in the shadows, beyond the reach of the candles, row after row of dusty mason jars climbed to the ceiling. Some were stuffed with dried herbs. Others sloshed with tonics of various dull shades of green and brown. And a few, Pearl knew, held dark, shriveled shapes floating in thick liquid the color of honey gone sour.

It was best not to think about those jars in particular.

Pearl hated that place—loathed every mildewed whiff of the dust-choked air. Truth be told, *everybody* hated it. Course, that never stopped folks from all over the county trekking up that bald hill to see Mama when they needed—or, worse yet, *thought* they needed—her help. Sure, they'd come for the things Mama squirreled away in the damp darkness, but never once had Pearl seen a single one follow Mama down into the root cellar.

But Pearl had followed her down.

She'd followed ever since she was big enough to negotiate the steep, rickety boards that passed for steps. As Mama's only child and heir, she *had* to come, even though, she didn't really have the stomach for apprenticing as a hill doctor.

"Not ready for the responsibility yet's more like it," Mama said with that thin grin she always got when she snatched onto the tail end of one of your thoughts, just daring you to protest that you hadn't spoken out loud.

Mama's face was shiny wet, with black strands of hair ripped free of the tight bun on the back of her head and pasted to her angular features with sweat. It looked like she'd been doing the Lord's Work while Pearl

slept—whipped herself into such a frenzy that God’s own hands had wrapped around that mortal vessel, twisting till the miracles were wrung out of Mama like a wet rag.

She brushed Pearlie’s cheek, her warm hand pulsing as if a fire burned inside. “Don’t suppose you’re ready to tell me the name of the little buck what done planted that baby in your belly?”

Pearlie bit her lip.

“I was afeared not.” She disappeared into the darkness. “Like I said, child, you just ain’t ready to take responsibility yet. That’ll change.”

Pearlie sat up slowly.

“You had your fleshy pleasure, but don’t for one minute think you can escape what follows it.”

Pearlie’s fingertips dipped into the knife scars in the ancient wood of the big table.

“Don’t you even dream you can make the responsibilities disappear just by visiting a baby-killing abortionist like Hazel Grubbs.”

Mama held out an old shoebox, dark with mold, which Pearlie took into her shaking hands. “I figure Jesse might be a good name for him ... after your Papa.”

Something stirred inside the damp and fuzzy box—“quickenin’,” as the old folks might say.

“Go on, child. You’re big enough to own up to your sins.”

The Red Wing lid tumbled to the dirt floor, revealing a pink, squishy thing barely the size of a mouse. It writhed in the dim candlelight, trying to shield the filmed-over black dots of its eyes. Half of its pig-like face was caved in where Miss Grubbs had been none too gentle in yanking it out of Pearlie. And the raw, bony edges of its mouth, too unfinished to have grown lips yet, opened and closed hungrily.

The girl screamed.

“No need to carry on so, child! For goodness sake, I had *you* by the time I was your age. Raising a youngun’s just the thing to teach a girl some responsibility.”

The thing in the shoebox lolled its too-big head over a torn shoulder that Mama’d stitched back on with coarse, black thread.

Pearlie shoved the box away and ran for the steps. Clawing at the boards with her hands, her feet scrambled wildly, taking two, sometimes three stairs at a time.

All the while Mama hollered from the darkness below, “Women was put on this Earth to bear fruit, child! Ain’t nobody’s fault but your own if’n that fruit is bitter!”

After the chill of the cellar, the steamy night air slapped Pearlie hard

enough to make her stagger. She shook it off and bolted down the hill at a full gallop, briars and brambles pricking her flesh.

"You can't outrun your responsibility to this baby!" Mama's voice echoed down from the top of the treeless hill. "Pearlie Little, don't you make me sic your papa after you, now!"

But the girl ran into the woods, the pain in her hollow belly flaring with every footfall.

Go ahead and call Papa, she yelled inside her skull. Surely, even *he'd* see Mama'd gone too far this time. To bring something back from the dead what hadn't even been alive yet... that couldn't be the Christian thing to do, could it?

A barn owl swooped low overhead, hooting accusations at her. Still Pearlie ran. She'd fly through the sweltering night all the way to the state line if she had to.

But she knew she was caught the second her raw, burning feet splashed into Stuart Creek, even before the hulking shadow rose up out of the dark water to swallow her whole. Papa's huge, ice-cold hand clamped over her mouth, the arm it was attached to just as bloated and purple as it'd looked the day Deacon Jennings found him drowned in that very creek five years back.

HAZEL GRUBB'S HEAD FLOATED IN AN OLD FISH TANK, THE MOUTH RIPPED WIDE IN a ceaseless, silent scream. You'd never've known Mama'd brought it back from the Other Side if it weren't for the way the eyes darted back and forth, following every motion in the root cellar.

Mama insisted that Miss Grubbs watch every nursing. "Just helping the Lord in the retribution department," she'd say, chuckling. But Pearlie doubted the crazy, glassed-over eyes really understood anything outside of their little fish tank world.

Not that it made any sense to the girl, either. After all, Jesse—as Mama insisted on calling the abomination—didn't need to eat no more. And even if it did, Mama had to know it was too little to feed like a real baby. Still, every four hours on the dot, day or night, Mama dragged her in front of the fish tank so that pink *thing* could root blindly around her tiny breasts.

It only took a week for Pearlie to forget how to cry.

"And how's my precious little angel this morning?" Mama swept the wriggling fetus away and gently dabbed imaginary drops of milk from lips that would never really be there.

It responded to Mama's cooing with a feeble croak, the best its unfinished lungs could manage. As Pearlie sluggishly buttoned her plaid

blouse, she thought she might've recognized something genuinely hungry about the bleating. But she doubted it was the kind of hunger milk would ever fill up.

Mama frowned at the hoarse sobs, and handed the creature back to Pearlle. "Child, don't you ever burp that baby?"

Perlele stared at the thing, its entire body fitting easily into the palm of her hand, every bit of its paper thin skin criss-crossed with purple veins like an insane jumble of miniature railroad tracks. Perlele rolled it in her palm, the head that was too big for its body twisting so far to one side that its wiry neck bones surely must've snapped.

Of course, a little thing like *that* didn't matter none. The hungry bleating just went on and on.

Mama snatched it away from her. "That's no way to hold him!"

Perlele tried hard not to giggle at the way Mama called it "him." As far as she could see, it didn't even have a sex yet. And never would.

"Just whose fault do you think that might be, missy?" Mama shook her head. "Sinful little girl. I swear, you're getting to be the worst mother I ever did see!"

*Is that cause we ain't got no looking glass handy?* Perlele smiled wide. *Hear that one, Mama?*

Papa thumped heavily down the root cellar steps, but Mama didn't turn around. "About time you got here. Suppose you was too busy fishing again, heh?"

Papa stared dead into the middle of nothing, water streaming down his bloated body, forming black mud on the dirt floor.

Mama clucked her tongue at the mess. "Well, act like you're useful, and drag out Aunt Millie's old steamer trunk. We got us some recollecting to do."

The dead man shuffled over to the shelves and stooped onto a knee that had been huge in life but was so swollen after the drowning that it had burst right through the rotted overalls. One hand lurched into the darkness and swept away a cardboard box that immediately split at the seam, vomiting yellowed copies of *Reader's Digest* onto the dirt.

"Careful now," Mama warned.

But Papa's other bloated mitt had already groped into the shadows. There was a thud as the big steamer pulled the shelf away from the wall, making mason jars clink together as they danced wildly on the narrow boards.

"You stupid old mule!" Mama yelled as she stretched out her spindly arms to keep the shelf from tipping over. "You break them jars and you'd be in a mess of trouble now, wouldn't you?"

Papa used both dead hands to ease the trunk into the puddle of light that seeped through the open cellar door.

"Bring that baby over here, child. There's something I want him to see."

"Should Miss Grubbs watch, too?"

Mama's eyes flashed as she took the abortion from Pearlie's outstretched hand. "Don't you sass me none, missy!"

The trunk overflowed with memories that Mama took out one by one, carefully showing each of them to her "grandson" and telling their tales. Every toy Pearlie'd ever had was imprisoned in that trunk. Mama insisted she never keep one long enough to grow too attached. *Gotta grow up; can't cling to childish things if you ever plan on becoming a woman.* Pearlie wrapped her gangly thirteen-year-old arms tightly around herself.

Peeking out from under a moth-eaten shawl sparkled the only store-bought toy she'd ever had—a snow globe Papa'd brought back from the Knoxville World's Fair. Inside was a tiny city crowded with skyscrapers. Not any one city in particular—just bits and pieces of cities from all over the world crammed together. The Golden Gate Bridge spanned the gap between the Eiffel Tower and the Chrysler Building. Big Ben loomed in back, his painted-on hands stuck forever at high noon, while the Sydney Opera House squatted up front like a glistening white crab. And the "snow" floating in the bright blue water wasn't white, but silver and gold to show off the magic of the place. It was the city-world she could have—*would* have—escaped to, if it weren't for...

"—you hear me, child?" Mama's long fingers dug into Pearlie's shoulder as she shook the girl while flourishing a tattered silk handkerchief that had been old even before her grandmother was born. "I was just saying that if we cut this down a night, it'd make a fine baptismal gown for Little Jesse, don't you think?"

Pearlie couldn't help but laugh out loud that time, which bent Mama's lip into a frown so sharp it could've drawn blood.

"Giving your child to the Lord is *not* a joke, girl!"

Pearlie could feel Miss Grubb's dead eyes boring into her back.

"It's a responsibility every mother owes her baby!"

Even one of Papa's massive boots seemed to move half an inch, almost as if his dead feet were shuffling uncomfortably.

Mama tenderly laid Jesse on a soft pile of old dresses in the trunk, then stomped towards Pearlie until their noses nearly touched. "Of course, you don't care about that none, now do you?"

Pearlie's heart banged at her temples.

"Selfish little girls don't give a whit about anybody but themself, now



do they?"

Ragged breaths clawed at Pearlie's throat.

"First you murder your own flesh and blood..."

She stepped back.

"...and now you won't even do the least little thing to save his tiny soul?"

Pearlie shook her head.

"How do you expect this baby to ever get baptized if we can't even tell the Lord the name of his father?"

"I won't..."

"Tell me!"

"I c-can't..."

Mama's voice softened as her butcher knife fingers stroked gently through the girl's hair. "Don't abandon your own child to the Lake of Fire just for the sake of stubbornness, girl."

Pearlie's narrow skull shook slowly from side to side, but as it did, her eyes rested for just an instant upon her Papa.

And an instant was all it took.

Mama turned on her dead husband, a bony fist trembling as it slowly rose.

"You good for nothing—" She whirled on Pearlie, slapping the girl to the ground. "—tramp! Wasn't it bad enough the way you tempted him when he was alive, that you have to go on being a distraction even now?"

Pearlie spat blood onto the dirt floor. It was no use reminding Mama that she'd been the one who'd caught Papa "fishing" with Pearlie down at the creek all those years ago. Mama had even been the one to pull him off of her, using her hands almost as much as her most powerful prayers to hold his head underwater long enough for the huge feet to finally stop kicking.

Most of all, there was no use reminding Mama because she'd known the truth all along, really. Pearlie could tell that by the way she snatched up the mason jar that held the dried-up remains of Papa's brains soaked in filthy orange fluid, shaking it in front of his dead, stone-still face.

"And you!" she screamed at him. "I could send you back to hell so fast—" For an instant Pearlie thought she might actually do it—undo the Work by smashing that jar and releasing the miracles that pushed Papa's putrefied limbs.

But the anger soon drained from Mama's face. "No. Like my ma always said, 'Gotta own up to your mistakes.' This is nobody's fault but my own." She smiled. "Guess I brought a little *too much* of you back from the Other Side, hey, old man?" She lovingly brushed the shiny black and purple

bulge of his cheek. "But that can be fixed."

Mama took a meat cleaver down from a peg on the damp cellar wall. "Suppose you can't go fishing no more if'n I cut off your bait."

Those dead eyes couldn't really have grown larger in fear—Pearlie must've imagined it. Bodies brought back from the Other Side clung to shadows of memories that made them pantomime over and over those same things they'd done in life, but the trials of passing away numbed everything else out of existence. Papa couldn't really feel fear no more than he could feel joy. It just wasn't possible. Course, dead folk weren't supposed to still be able to breed either.

Mama sure was one mighty powerful doctor.

Pearlie shuffled forward, mesmerized by what looked for all the world like the tiniest twitching at the corner of Papa's dead mouth. By rights, the thought of him suffering through what Mama'd planned should have pleased her. Lord knows he'd brought enough pain into Pearlie's short life. But somehow the thought of one more misery piled up on top of all the others just didn't seem as soothing to her as it should have. After all, it wouldn't undo all those things that'd happened over the years—wouldn't bring back the chance for escape, or even better yet, take away the need to do so in the first place. And somehow, the thought of Papa without his manhood seemed even worse than Papa without his life.

At least, she was sure Papa would've thought so.

Pearlie didn't remember stepping forward. Her tiny hand seemed to reach out on its own, all casual-like, and swept the big mason jar from the table. It shattered like a bomb, stinging her legs with specks of glass, as putrid orange jelly oozed over the dirt floor.

Papa's bloated body deflated like a balloon—shriveling away to what you might expect a five-year-old corpse to look like in less than a breath.

"Murderer!" The cleaver trembled high over Mama's head.

"But, Mama—"

"Bible says, 'Honor thy father and thy mother.'" She took a single step forward. "It don't add, 'unless you feel like they don't deserve it!'"

Pearlie darted behind the old oak table, its surface pocked with the scars of hundreds of sacrifices over the centuries.

"First you murder your baby, now your own father!" She stalked forward. "Guess we both know who's next on your list, don't we?"

The cleaver whistled through the mildewed air as Mama's long arms stretched out over the table. Pearlie shot between the thick oak legs and scrambled out the other side, running for the stairs.

"I ain't never done nothing what wasn't aimed at getting you to grow up and take some responsibility! Ain't that what a mother's *supposed* to do?"

Pearlie bolted for the blinding light beyond the cellar door. But as soon as one bare foot touched that first step, the door slammed down just inches above her head. She tried to twist out of the way, but her feet tangled together, sending her sprawling onto the rickety boards.

Mama kept on coming, as slow and certain as the very Reaper himself, her thin grin stretched so wide you could've sworn her head was about to split plum in two.

Pearlie's eyes scavenged the dusty gloom for escape, falling finally into the slender gap between the wall and the shelf Papa'd pulled out earlier. Quick as a barn cat, Pearlie squeezed into the narrow space. But, skinny as she was, the girl was soon wedged in tight.

The cleaver bit into a shelf just inches from her nose. "Come on out of there right this minute and take your punishment like a grown woman."

It was more blind fear than conscious thought that made Pearlie brace her scrawny shoulders against the damp earth and shove the shelf for all she was worth. There was a sound like thunder as wood and glass erupted, burying Mama in debris.

And then there was silence.

The head of Hazel Grubbs floated upside down in the fish tank, the mason jar that'd held its soul one of the dozens lying in pieces on the floor. Cemetery-quiet. Then the cool, damp air quivered with an obscenely hungry bleating coming from the nest of rags in the corner.

Numb, Pearlie staggered over shards of broken glass, leaving a trail of bloody footprints to the big old steamer trunk. Inside, the half-formed clumps of flesh jerked spastically. For a second Pearlie wondered if the creature had been hurt, but it was no more than the familiar convulsions that passed for "normal" in a thing that had never really had a chance to be either alive or dead. But then, like Mama would've asked, "Just whose fault was that?"

Pearlie wasn't sure anymore.

Lost in the wilderness of shattered glass was Pearlie's snow globe, oily blue water dripping from the cracked dome. She picked it up, carefully turning it so that a bubble floated to the place where the hole in the sky threatened Big Ben. She wondered why it'd never occurred to her before that the clock could just as easily be frozen at midnight as noon.

"P-Pearlie?"

The hills held their breath.

"Child, help Mama up." She coughed up thick black blood. "Lord, just look at this mess you made."

Pearlie stared silently as Mama pulled herself to her feet. Her broken

arm was kinked in as many places as a lightning bolt. Blood pasted her black hair to the knife-sharp features of her face.

Pearlie walked back over the broken glass to stand nose-to-nose with her mother. Something about the way the girl balanced on the hamburger shreds of her soles, the slicing pain moistening eyes that seemed so much older now than they should have been, must've taken Mama off guard. Her dark eyes narrowed and ranged over Pearlie like she was sizing up some prize animal at the Fair. But when those eyes fell on the broken toy in the girl's hand, she just shook her head and chuckled. "You ain't ever planning on growing up, are you?"

Blood blossomed on Mama's forehead as the snow globe slammed into her skull again, and again, and again. By the time Pearlie finished, not a tiny plastic building, not a drop of oily blue water, not even a single flake of golden snow could be found anywhere in the dark cellar.

PEARLIE SAT ON THE PORCH IN MAMA'S BIG ROCKER, WINCING AS THE SIZZLING SUN topped the eastern hills. She supposed she should start thinking of it as her own rocker now—Lord knows everybody else in these parts did—but she wasn't quite ready to lay claim to all of Mama's legacy just yet.

Truth be told, though, Pearlie was getting pretty handy with Mama's recipes. And folks knew it, too. More and more were climbing that treeless hill, asking for this or that, none of them seeming to care if Mama was there to give it to them or not, so long as *somebody* was. But they never followed Pearlie down into the root cellar. Not a one of them.

Many a morning she'd thought about putting a torch to the place and heading off for that far away city-world. But even those thoughts were coming less and less. Who'd take care of folks in these parts if she left? What with Mama and Miss Grubbs both gone, there was nobody for people to doctor with but her. She couldn't just abandon a body in need.

Little Jesse nipped at her breast hard enough to draw blood.

No, her place was here. It was thorny enough being a single mother on top of that bald hill; in the city-world it would be impossible—at least with a baby barely the length of her middle finger who would never grow one single day older. Pearlie rolled her exhausted head on her shoulders and listened to her neck pop and crackle like a campfire. All these new responsibilities were crushing her.

Course, if it ever got to be too much, she could always bring Mama back to help. •

*"The first night, just after the burial,  
when the ground is still soft, things  
happen. There's a fresh corpse in its hole  
and the graveyard's all a-twitter..."*

# Enter the Worms

Jean-Claude Dunyach

translated by Sheryl Curtis

"CATCH THE LITTLE BUGGER!"

Shouts. Feet pounding. Jack runs as fast as he can and doesn't stop to look back. When he reaches the boarding school's second floor, he has just enough of a lead to find a hiding place. His hiding place.

Behind the four privies, at the far end of the dorm hallway, there is an almost unnoticeable cranny. If you're thin enough, or desperate enough, you can squeeze between the dirty brick wall and the wooden partition, up and over the bags of quicklime the janitor uses to disinfect the pits when they get to stink too much. It's Jack's refuge, the only place in the world where he feels safe enough to cry.

And if anyone were to find him, well then, Jack would throw a fistful of lime into his face. It eats right through the eyes, all the way inside the brain. Davey says so. And Davey is looking for him, with his gang, to punish him for God knows what. Any excuse will do.

Crouching behind the bags, Jack hears them search the privies. They're furious, of course, but starting to tire of the game. All he has to do is wait them out. When the dinner bell rings, he'll be safe at the table for the younger boarders.

"We'll pay him a little visit tonight," says Davey, on the other side of the

partition. "I have a good one for him. Stupid little bastard. When he's dead, he won't be able to find a hiding place."

Jack hears the sound of someone urinating. It feels as if Davey is right beside him. One day, Davey tried to force him to hold his dick while he pissed. Jack screamed that he would squeal. *Really*. One of his few, too few, acts of defiance. Since that time, almost every night, the big kids sneak into his dorm to exact their cruellest revenge.

They whisper stories into his ear.

THE DORM WINDOWS LIE HIDDEN BEHIND HEAVY, MUD-COLORED CURTAINS. THE iron cots are arranged in two rows, separated by lockers. After the bedtime prayer, Jack wriggles in between the rough sheets and tries to fall asleep immediately. If he's sleeping soundly enough, Davey won't be able to wake him and he might just escape the nightmares.

Like every night for months, that plan doesn't work.

"It's time to talk about the worms," a voice whispers against his cheek. "Don't bother closing your eyes. I have a little riddle for you."

Jack smells Davey's sour breath and curls up a little tighter under the blanket. But he can't shut out Davey's words.

"What's the longest night for a stiff, you stupid bugger? If you can answer me that, I'll leave you alone."

Jack clenches his teeth to keep from falling into the trap. He hears sniggering from the other side of his bed. It sounds like there's at least three of them.

"No idea, eh?" Davey licks his lips, producing a sound like that of slugs splattering. "Listen up..."

"The first night, just after the burial, when the ground is still soft, *things* happen. There's a fresh corpse in its hole and the graveyard's all a-twitter. The dead like making a commotion, you know. It keeps them busy. So they come to have a look at the newcomer."

"The flowers attract them," says a raspy voice on the other side of his head. "And the smell of rot. Like flies."

"Shut your trap. I'm the one telling this story!"

"So, picture the scene, brat. There's the new stiff, you see, lying in his box. And he hears scratching above him. The other corpses are all around the grave, scraping at the dirt with their fingernails. Fingernails grow quickly when you've got nothing to do with them. And the old cadavers have particularly pointy nails. The noise could wake the dead!"

As he talks, Davey rubs the metal bed bedpost behind Jack and the bed vibrates. Jack stifles a moan, his eyelids still clamped shut.

"The new corpse is doing the same thing you are. He's trying to pretend

that *this is not happening!* But the old stiffs dig him up, bit by bit and then they gnaw around the nails of the wooden coffin. Until the cover pops open.

"And you know what happens then, brat? Do you? I just have to tell you. That way, you'll know what to expect when it's your turn."

"You'll die too. Maybe even before I do!"

Jack almost shouted, forgetting himself. Pretending he didn't hear them was no good. It just got them all that more excited. It was better to fight them.

"Yeah." Davey's smile is particularly cruel. "Yeah, but, I'll be in my family's marble vault. The dead can't break stone or gnaw through lead. So they take it out on poor bastards like you who get buried without any protection. And I'm going to tell you what they do to people like you."

"First, they touch them. Like this..." Jack shudders. "Those who still have their fingers do, anyway. And the others, well the others make do with what they have left, using teeth, or maybe some entrails that have come unwound. A fresh body smells almost good to a rotten old corpse! They tear off the newcomer's clothing or the shroud, if it has one. Fat worms twist about in their stumps and climb out onto the new guy's skin."

Jack feels like throwing up, but Davey is too close and he can't get up. All he sees is the whites of Davey's eyes, shining in the dark.

"Once they've got him naked, the dead pull him out of the hole and then they *play with him*... You're too young to know about that, but I'm going to tell you all there is to know."

Davey plants his large hand firmly over Jack's mouth to keep him from crying out. When he does that, Jack knows it's going to be really bad. He tries to bite Davey's hand, but the older boy is ready for him.

"They fuck him, you know. They all wait in line for their turn. The oldest go first. They no longer have even a bit of flesh to give him to suck on, so they ram their bones into all his holes. Can you picture it? When the bones break, yellow, rotting marrow spurts out."

"And it goes on all night," whispers a voice from the darkness.

"All night," Davey solemnly agrees. "As long as the stars are still out, as long as there are still ghosts standing in line. That's how they welcome the recently deceased into their cemetery. So that they never forget their place."

He withdraws his hand and adds in a final whisper, "You may die in your sleep, brat. Then it will be your turn! Sleep with one eye open."

Then Davey pulls the cover back up over Jack's head, just a little too tightly, as if to smother him. And Jack knows that the night looms ahead of him like an unscaleable mountain.





THE NEXT MORNING, THE OTHER CHILDREN AVOID JACK. THEY ALL KNOW THAT Davey came to see him, but took pains to speak quietly. The stories that Davey spews into his ear like poison don't just give him nightmares. They cause the others to avoid him like the plague. Even if he wanted to, he could never tell anyone about it.

Walking out into the daylight in the yard after Mass, Jack is overcome with dizziness. The sky is a patchwork quilt coming apart. The autumn clouds float by, announcing snow, and the birds have already left. Beyond the courtyard wall, with its crest of iron spikes, Jack sees the tips of the yews in the neighboring cemetery and shivers.

A hand falls onto his shoulder. Jack jumps, dropping the thick missal that he's been holding close to his chest.

"The principal would like to see you, little one." The morning monitor is a young, colorless man bound for the priesthood. He picks up the missal, dusts it off with his sleeve, and hands it back to Jack. "You're a believer? That's good. Never forget, even in your darkest hours, that God is Love and Goodness. Don't disappoint him by being weak in the face of adversity."

"What does the principal want with me?" Jack manages to stammer, as he takes the book.

"He'll tell you himself. Come!"

The monitor leads him to the ground-floor office that no one ever enters without a twinge of fear. Jack clenches his teeth as he walks through the door. *If someone has snitched...*

But nothing is ever quite like you expect it. The principal is not alone. Jack's aunt is standing beside him. The sister of the father he's never really known, the father his mother always refused to talk about. Jack and his mother rarely got to see her. His aunt would come to visit them in their old house, leave a package of clothing or food on the corner of a table, then go on her way without kissing him. But Jack remembers her slightly hunched back, her perpetually pinched mouth, like a purse with the strings drawn too tight.

"You have to be brave, Jack," she says with a sniff. "Your mother..."

All of a sudden, his whole universe collapses around him. Jack reads the terrible news on the severe face, whispers *Mama is dead?* and does not wait for the confirming nod before wailing desperately.

CURLED IN FETAL POSITION ON HIS BED, JACK SHIVERS IN SPITE OF THE EXTRA blanket they've pulled over him. The principal tried to calm him down, then firmly held his head under the tap, icy water flowing over him, until he grew silent. His aunt left. After delivering her mortal announcement,

she stayed in the office just a few more minutes, discussing the funeral arrangements, ignoring Jack's tears as she had ignored his cries.

"I'll pay for everything. Yet again," she added. "I'm sorry to have to be the one to say it, but she was an actress, without a penny to her name. My late lamented brother wanted this... creature to lie with him in the family tomb. But he's no longer here to oppose my decisions, fortunately. I'm entitled to choose whom I'll lie with for all eternity, when God calls me back to him."

"The cemetery next door, although close to the alehouse, is more than suitable," the Principal replied. "The caretaker is a former employee. We can arrange something quickly, to everyone's satisfaction."

"No ceremony. I haven't the means for that."

"A simple benediction. *Pro Deo*. Jack can attend. I'll take him myself. Of course, the gravedigger will have to be paid, but..."

"Can you make all of the arrangements by this afternoon?" she said after a moment's silence. "I'd like to go back home and put this unfortunate episode behind me."

Jack would have liked to plug his ears, but the words wormed their way into his brain. Lying in bed, he heard them again. *When you're dead, you can't hide anymore*. Everything is revealed when it's time for the worms. Lies. Deprivation. Fragility.

When the monitor comes to take him to the cemetery, he wipes his last tears from his eyes. If someone had come to attend the burial, in a lonely corner, far from the steles and stucco ornaments, they would have seen a dry-eyed child, standing next to a grave that could have been his own.

A QUICK PRAYER FOR THE DECEASED BEFORE THE EVENING MEAL. THE PRINCIPAL manages to avoid saying her name even once. The other children glance sidelong at Jack, but no one speaks to him. He does not eat. He sits there without moving, hands clenched on his knees. When the bell rings, he stands up, like a robot, and is the first to leave.

Davey hustles to catch up with him before the monitor forces the students into rows. He grabs him by the arm and, with a broad smile, says, "Is it true what they're saying? That your mother the whore is really dead?"

Jack stares at him without blinking, then throws himself at Davey's throat, trying to bite him. The attack takes Davey by surprise. He manages to throw Jack off with a clumsy backhand, but Jack charges again, ignoring Davey's blows. Deep scratches run down the bully's face. Jack has tasted blood.

When the monitor, drawn by the shouts of the spectators, makes his

way over to the two, Jack flees. He races up the large staircase and runs to the privies. He will never cry again. He will never sleep again either. He's just thin enough to slip into his hiding place behind the illusory rampart formed by the bags of quicklime.

The searchers give up after an hour. The boarding school is immense, with nooks and crannies everywhere. They're counting on hunger to force Jack out. But Jack doesn't care. For the first time in months, he's truly alone.

At least he thinks he is.

"WE KNOW YOU'RE THERE, BRAT!"

The words come from the other side of the wooden partition. *One of the big kids in Davey's gang.* Jack stares wide-eyed in the dark. His hearing is unexpectedly sharp. He can even hear the rats shuffling in the attic above him.

"Davey told us to warn you. He's in the cemetery, digging. If he digs you know who up, the dead will have a lot more time to amuse themselves with her. He's even got a hideout so he can watch. Then he'll be able to tell you *everything*."

Paralyzed, unable to escape, Jack listens. He holds his breath, the voice obstinately going on, repeating the same message over and over, with a few variations.

Then, inexplicably, the voice stops. Jack hears footsteps trail off. He waits there, the fingernails of his clenched hands digging painfully into his palms. Then he slips out of his cubbyhole on tiptoe. The immense hallway is filled with shadows, but nothing moves.

Three pairs of eyes, hidden behind a half-open door, follow him as he heads toward the stairway.

IT IS POSSIBLE TO GET OUT OF THE BUILDING THROUGH ANY WINDOW ON THE ground floor. Yet the wall around the courtyard with its iron crest is insurmountable. But Jack knows about a delivery door, behind the kitchens, with a broken lock. The bolt slides back easily. Rumor has it that some students rub it with lard to keep it from creaking.

Once outside, Jack starts to run. The evening fog hangs above the water-filled ditches. It transforms the dirt road into a narrow corridor with thick gray walls that close in behind Jack. Clay sticks to his shoes. Jack feels the weight of a nameless terror at the very thought of what lies ahead.

The cemetery starts where the courtyard wall turns a corner, just opposite the main entrance. The wrought iron gates are closed, but the

low wall has been poorly maintained and is crumbling in places. On the other side lies the kingdom of the worms.

Wisps of fog curl along the ground between the graves. The tallest headstones peek through, like coral through the foam. The air is damp and smells of sod, with whiffs of musty flowers whenever Jack tramples a wreath. The night smothers the sound of his footsteps.

He's lost.

From time to time, the moon slips through the clouds, reflecting in the pools that lie in the pathways. Davey is somewhere in the labyrinth where the dead hide. With his mother. But he *will* save her as long as he gets there in time.

Meanwhile, three shadows stand around one of the rare mausoleums that is still intact. Under the blind eye of a granite angle, they unfold the sheets they have taken from their beds and don them. The little bastard is going to be scared shitless!

JACK LOOKS FOR HIS MOTHER. BITS AND PIECES OF THE STORY SPIN THROUGH HIS mind as the icy wind strokes the skin under his shirt. His teeth chatter and he can do nothing to stop them. He's only been in the cemetery once, and all he looked at was the mound of damp dirt shoveled next to the open grave. He runs up and down the paths randomly, tricked by the fickle moon and foggy dead ends.

New noises drown out the sounds he makes. Gravel rolling. Bones cracking. Jack glances over his shoulder. He thinks he sees gray shapes emerge from the fog, on his trail. *The dead are gathering.*

And just as he is about to give up, Jack notices a shovel planted in the ground straight ahead. The moon disappears again, but he's got his bearings and walks on blindly. His mother's grave is there, apparently intact. Neither Davey nor the dead have violated it yet. He's in time.

Near the edge, the damp earth has sunk slightly. Jack lowers his head. That afternoon, he was unable to pray. His heart was too empty. Perhaps, if he tries again, he'll find the words to chase evil away. He closes his eyes, folds his hands as they taught him.

Something clinks behind him, forcing a sob from his throat. He leaps around. Three shapes, enveloped by the fog, slip toward him through the tombstones. They're immense, arms spread like the branches of a tree. As they walk, their bones clatter. *The oldest go first...* The fog wraps around them like scarves, hiding the holes in the shrouds and their skulls.

Right behind them, he can make out weaving silhouettes, yellowish reflections that could be eyes. It looks like the entire cemetery has been roused for the party. In the distance, the reassuring bulk of the boarding

school is gone, swallowed up by the night.

Jack whimpers. He steps back, eyes riveted on the apparitions. His foot slips in a puddle and water climbs up his sock, as if some icy hand is pulling him down. He bumps into something. The shovel. He pushes against the handle and the mud lets go with a sucking sound. The dead come ever closer, forming a semi-circle, drawn by the fresh grave. *The dead pull him out of the hole and then they play with him...*

Mouth open, prayers frozen in his throat, Jack tries to lift the shovel up. The handle is too large for him. The mucky iron blade is as heavy as lead. The cadaver closest to him starts to laugh and Jack finds an inner strength. He swings the tool and brings it down like a flail.

A voice screams out, ending in a gurgle. The iron has struck something solid. One of the shrouds crumples slowly, and the other two run off, yelling. His palms burning, Jack drops the shovel. The moon is completely hidden behind the clouds. The first few drops of rain slide down his cheeks.

A few seconds later, the cemetery is once again silent. But not the least bit deserted. The blurry shapes Jack had seen between the headstones are still there. They're just *slower*. Dawn is still hours away. The dead are never in a hurry.

Jack bends down and pulls the damp sheet off the body. Blood shimmers on Davey's face. The iron blade has opened a gash in his skull, but the sheet softened the blow to some extent. He's still breathing, shallowly, and Jack can hear little bubbles of spittle burst at the corner of his slack mouth.

When he looks up, he sees that the shapes have moved closer. The wind is blowing them gradually, relentlessly, toward him. Instinctively, he knows that neither wood nor iron will injure them, that neither prayers nor supplications will convince them to give up their games. There are rules here, as there are everywhere, and Jack the bastard knows all too well what that means.

Determined, he picks up the shovel and holds it close to his chest. He looks for an answer in the wisps of fog, in the fuzzy faces that the rain draws before his eyes, but he finds none. A gust of wind pulls at the freshly dug dirt and Jack feels ghostly fingers reach toward the coffin that lies at his feet.

The wall of thick fog and shadows extends to the other side of the cemetery. Abandoned mausoleums have disappeared behind the curtain of rain. He stands alone with the dead and has nothing to offer them.

Davey moans. A heavy sound immediately muffled by the fog. A faint shadow leans toward the boy's face and then immediately stands up. The

living hold no interest for it. All that counts is the fresh cadaver lying six feet under ground, like a flask of fine spirits in the bottom of a cellar. Waiting to be emptied, then discarded.

The moans grow louder. Distracted for a moment, the ghosts now draw closer together, their features seeming to become firmer. With each gust of the wind, Jack sees skulls, swollen bellies, fleshless arms, fingerless hands. The first comes forward. A skeleton, nearly whole, wrapped in white. When he approaches the mound of freshly dug dirt, as if it were sucking him in, Jack moves to bar his way.

He stares into the bottomless eye sockets, concealed a second later by a breath of wind. But he has just enough time to establish a *contact*. Raising the shovel before him like a pitiful sword, he walks over to Davey and points him out, insistently.

The ghost follows, wrapping itself around the upraised shovel, the handle poking through its entrails. Jack clenches his teeth. Ahead, the relentless line of the dead continues to advance. They know why they've come and they won't leave until they have satisfied their cravings. And Jack has nothing else to offer them.

After an interminable length of time, the ghost nods his head. Jack raises the shovel and, eyes clenched tight, he strikes in the direction of the moans, over and over, ignoring the sound of breaking bone and bursting flesh. Until everything is quiet.

There's a brand new cadaver in the cemetery. They won't even have to dig it up.

JACK DROPS THE SHOVEL, COVERED WITH UNMENTIONABLE DEBRIS. HE KNEELS NEAR the mound, arms wrapped tightly around himself. The rain strikes the mud with a chewing sound.

Ever so slowly, a wispy silhouette rises up from the grave. Once she's thick enough, Jack recognizes her. Eyes filled with tears, he reaches out to touch her one last time. But she turns from him as if he no longer exists.

Slowly, she heads over to the long line of the dead that stand around Davey. To wait her turn. •

*Time, in so much SF, is not a property of  
the universe but an Intention,  
like a deity that must put things right  
to stave off paradoxes...*

## On film & SF: **Time Travel Template**

Steve Mohn

H. G. WELLS' NOVELLA *THE TIME MACHINE* IS NOT A STORY BUT, appropriately, a travelogue, a high-minded late-Victorian celebration of science and technology which also, conscious of class, warns its readers of what might happen if we don't watch out. The future holds vast promise but peril too, and what is more perilous to an Englishman than a failure of social order? Social rigidification. Wells created a simple binary culture in which the Haves evolve into docile children who play in the garden while the Have-nots labor in foul factories. Now the upper class is a plowman's lunch. Capital irony, wot?

Nearly alone among time-travel stories, Wells' tale doesn't use a paradox plot engine. You might argue that altering the course of events will not matter if you go, as Wells' narrator does, forward instead of back, but this only underscores how slight the future feels. Though we plan for retirement and stave off disease with aerobic exercise and macrobiotic diets, it is the past that haunts us, driving us on like mad old Ahab after the white whale that bit him. When we fret about the past being altered, we fret about an effect on ourselves or something catching up with us. Whether or not the past exists as a go-to-able when-space, time-travel tales approach it as a made thing, and most such tales chase their tails



looking for new ways to stop chasing tails, employing any branching dimension or quantum gymnastics to avoid what Harry Harrison happily allowed in his comic novel *The Technicolor Time Machine*, in which filmmakers become characters in the Icelandic saga they have gone back to film firsthand in a bid to make a cheap epic and save their studio. By the end, so many people have made so many trips, and personal timelines have crossed so many times, that three or four of one person can be seen in lively conversation with himself.

Still, time-travel movies (*Time Cop*, *The Terminator* and sequel) rely on a threat of paradox, creating it then working for the rest of the film to undo it. In both films of Pierre Boulle's novel, *La Plan te des singes*, time travel operates as a vigorous getting-there mechanism more exciting than Boulle's straightforward journey in a light-sail ship, in which time travel occurs by virtue of relativity. In the 1968 *Planet of the Apes*, relativity and poor astrogation take the hero forward in time but back to where he started. In the 2001 remake, a temporal storm does the work, whipping the astronaut to Earth for a horrific variation on Boulle's droll denouement. In *Twelve Monkeys*, a time machine meant to fix a problem creates it then cements it in time as a whirlpool from which humanity will not escape. In the comic thriller *Time After Time*, Jack the Ripper escapes in Wells' time machine to 1979, Wells in pursuit; the machine provides a solution which strands Wells in a future he would not have otherwise lived to see, and, echoing the novella: "The Time Traveller vanished three years ago. And, as everybody knows now, he has never returned." In the 1960 film, friend Filby, realizing the narrator has returned to the future, assures his housekeeper: "He has all the time in the world," nicely hitting the muted tone of Wells' finish.

John Brosnan and Peter Nicholls' joint entry on this first film, in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, complains that director George Pal and scenarist David Duncan dropped the author's Victorian class-distinction parable in favor of making the narrator a romantic hero, who rouses the Eloi to overthrow their cannibal masters. This feels argued from a desire for faithful adaptation and, as time goes by, becomes harder to see, given that Marxism has pretty much gone the way of other flightless birds. But more to the point, the filmmakers of 1960 had to put a story to the thin development Wells left. His narrative events are mostly adhered to, the spirit of his dialogue survives, but he had no ending for the bulk of his tale. The Time Traveller simply regains his machine and leaves, flying into a very far future to see the world ending as the bloated sun cools and crustaceans drag themselves along a stony beach. It is effective writing, strong in its sense of desolation, but would no more end a movie

than it ends the novella. Wells was deceptively true to his tale. It is about time *as* travel, so it is not about narrative closure. The story doesn't "put time right again" nor solve a problem, but invents the circular structure employed ever since by nearly all such tales.

The first film optimistically opens on New Year's Eve, and on the eve of a new century, the Twentieth—an idea Wells did not have in 1895, when *The Time Machine: An Invention* appeared. The slow snow falling, the sleigh bells jingling, the lazily clip-clopping horses and revellers' cries muffled by the snow is beautifully sad, expectant and timely, with the pun intended. That same tone will close the film and quietly frame the fantastic tale, much as Wells did. The narrator returns to the future not to observe Victorian class warfare but to free an oppressed people and reunite with Yvette Mimieux, adroitly cast as Weena, the Eloi woman-child so pathetic in the novella, crying like a kitten as the narrator manfully marches off in search of botany and truth, then dying as Eloi do, at the hands of Morlocks.

Otherwise, the first film doesn't much change the novella. Weena is saved but then left behind. The jump to the last days of Earth is dropped but the dinner party set-up, the plan to meet again in a week, the telling of the tale and return to the future are all faithful. So is most of what he does there. The differences lie in two stopovers he makes along the way, meeting his friend Filby as an older man and again as a much older man. The scenes are meant only to fill out the movie, but it's worth noting that the makers decided to exploit time travel in a manner consistent with Wells' tale rather than open out the story and dent it.

Which is just what the new *The Time Machine* movie so dunderheadedly does. First it tries to escape the stuffy men's club opening of both novella and first film, imposing a fiancée, whose death during a robbery inspires the hero to gnaw his pencil and invent time travel, only to learn that returning to the past to save his love will do no such thing. She dies again, but differently. She will always die because Time, in so much SF, is not a property of the universe but an Intention, like a deity that must put things right to stave off paradoxes. Unintentionally, the fiancée's second death is funny, since the audience is so far ahead of the film (and the story lifts a weak page from Wells, who sent his hero forward after Weena's death rather than have him stay to work something out).

In the first film, director George Pal and his FX team spent a good two reels showing the time traveller travelling, using time-elapse, fast motion, animation and physical effects to convince and engage the audience. The new movie shows the traveller travelling too and you would think that, with New Technology, we could be even more convinced. But the

sequences yawn. Gotten through quickly, they look muddy, plastic and, frankly, cheap—like old special effects but afflicted with Flying Camera Syndrome. (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, in which airborne cameras feel more justified, is also a movie going, “Wheeee!”) And it takes more than two reels to get the traveller to his main stop. This second version reshoots the original stopovers, straining, as the first film did not, for operetta comedy (Orlando Bloom’s turn as a slightly manic know-it-all artificial intelligence), and to set up the far-future world the traveller will find—man blows up the Moon. The notion that fusion devices meant to excavate living space could break up the Moon and rain chunks of it at the Earth is Saturday cartoon logic. The Moon is a big place, a planet in its own right. And this movie about time has a loose sense of it. Eight hundred thousand years is a long time for a biosphere, a short time geologically; yet we watch an ice age come and go and Dakotan badlands rise and fall to wind erosion (where New York City once stood?) but find a remnant humanity lamed by man-made disasters from before all that. And they still have chunks of New York City. Also, English.

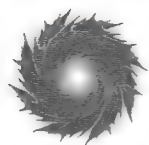
Wells found the Eloi pathetic. The first movie found them disappointing, even gutless. This new film thinks they’re great, noble savages with just enough technology to make life good. And where the first film grew Weena to a suitable age, this film plays the family card, splitting her into a single mother and son. A new kind of Morlock, voracious and brutal, roars out of the ground to scare up an appetite; previously some automatic system rounded up the Eloi by sounding a hypnotic call. That last idea appears in the new film as a dream telepathy that links the undergrounders and torments the sleeping Eloi. The main event of the novella and both films remains the loss of the Weena character to the Morlocks.

Because you need the man-eating Morlocks or you have no story—that is what Hollywood *means* by “a story.” It means hiring Jeremy Irons as a Morlock king to explain the movie, perhaps to the team rewriting the first one, which had merely *revised* the Wells novella and remains the more charming film, more so for having never left London. And its Morlocks didn’t talk you to death. But this new *The Time Machine* is not about Morlocks, nor Eloi. It is about neither travel nor time. Nothing that happens in it has anything to do with anything else that happens in it. Irons growls his best but can only fall back on yet more Intentions of Time and Everything Happens Because It Must and All Must Be Put Right—concerns H. G. Wells ignored. He was recounting a trip. You wonder too what’s kept that AI librarian going for 800,000 years and why no one has stoved-in his artificial head just for being so annoying. Instead, he’s allowed to filch the end of *Fahrenheit 451* (the end of the

film, not the book).

*The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells remains, however dated or narratively challenged, a nice piece of work, balanced, as casual as it is formal and about what it says it is about. The George Pal film of 1960 is a firm adaptation and far better as a steam punk forerunner than the written tale because the movie had to describe (build, show) the machine itself, and do it in period. The only period this remake knows about is the one in which it was made. Its time machine is all light show and, in the end, fittingly, a bomb. The story Wells wrote over one hundred years ago proves a durable template because neither of the two films derived from it managed to change it much; the new film mostly comments on the old one and has little use for the book. It's a morph. •

1 Joseph Milicia, "Planet of the Apes by Pierre Boulle, translated by Xan Fielding," *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, no. 161 (January 2002): 20 – 22. First-rate discussion of Boulle's novel and the major *Planet of the Apes* films.



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*A crew in pressure suits crawls over the machines, tending them, nursing them beyond their fragile, temperamental capacities...*

# The Frontier Archipelago

Charles Coleman Finlay

CERES, VESTA, HEKTOR, GASPRA. TINY ISLANDS IN THE SEA of space. Hydrogen to harvest, oxygen to liberate, and, sometimes, a cold oasis, an ice well, to discover. And everywhere carbons, organics, the raw material of life. Land for the taking, outside any bureaucrat's jurisdiction.

So people take it. They take Troilus, chasing Jove. Skim over the surface, to the front porch, the front door, the dock. Inside, a warren of corridors and rooms. Human nests.

Out the back door, down the tube, through the airlocks, and into the cavity at asteroid's heart. Machines crush the ore, extract every useful molecule, and convey it to the colony. They are huge, awkward machines, cobbled together jerry-rigs of second-rate equipment and outer planet cast-offs, squeezed into spaces too small to work effectively. A crew in pressure suits crawls over them, tending them, nursing them beyond their fragile, temperamental capacities.

Early in the prime shift, vibrations snap a restraining bolt on the main

borer. The frame heaves, twists, and pins McAfee against the stone. Broadnax reaches him first. Broadnax calls the ER team, patches the exposed tear in McAfee's suit, starts the O<sub>2</sub>.

It takes the whole work crew and the rescue team together nearly four hours to dislodge the borer and free McAfee. Broadnax stays with him the whole time. He was the first one there. It's his job. He watches McAfee's temperature drop on the readout, listens to McAfee's rib-punctured lungs fill up with blood. The two men have worked together seven years. Near the end, when McAfee's drug-numbered eyes start to drift closed and stay closed, Broadnax presses his faceplate on McAfee's.

"Just grease the fucker and shove it in the hole," he says off channel. Crew talk for get to work.

A half-smile flickers on McAfee's lips. "Damn straight."

McAfee is dead long before they free his crushed body from its metal trap. Broadnax spends the rest of the shift repairing damage to the borer. The colony needs more space for the hydroponics farms, and they are way behind schedule.

Through the airlocks, up the tube, in the back door and along the maze of corridors to his apartment. Broadnax stores his pressure suit in the locker by the hatch. His tiny daughter sleeps in her swing. Her mouth hangs open. She doesn't stir at the kiss he places gently on her head, among the curls.

Broadnax walks through the kitchen. His wife is cooking dinner. Tomorrow, when she's sunside working on the solar collectors, it'll be his turn to watch the baby and cook.

"How was your day?" she asks.

Broadnax jacks his prosthetic arm into the computer and recalibrates the servos. His right arm is only six months old. He still has to calibrate it every day.

"Same old, same old," he answers.

Steam rises off the beans and rice. The pickled beets and spinach make his mouth water. He eats enough for two men. •

*"When you turn, you turn away. And that's the truth, Maxi. You turn away. Turn your back on all the crap that used to pile up..."*

# Kolorado

Steve Mohn

WHEN SHE'S THIS BONE-HUNGRY SHE STOPS SEEING COLORS.

She's out on the corner, way past ten. She's cold as hell, waiting, watching the traffic. The stores are closed and the lights up and down the streets have hot silver halos around them. She can't tell green from red from blue, it's just this hot silver light, like old movies, and the cars going by leave streaks that hang on the air, as if burned in. So she knows she's really starved.

Then Vince pulls up in a Town Car so big you could park other cars inside it. Powers down the window, says, "Get in." Like he owns it. And because of that colorblind thing she can't tell, but her fingers *must* be blue. She can hardly work the handle.

Then Big Vin kicks that spaceship away from the curb and into the streaky silver traffic and her back almost goes through the seat.

"How you been?"

She looks at him, figuring someone might as well look at someone. Her hair's all over her face in what Pablo calls a spider cut, all spiky blades of hair like spider legs or the leaves on some plant? She can't remember. But does The Great Vincenzo notice—one finger on the wheel? head tipped back like a king? hair like black cake frosting smoothed on with a



spatula, a big blob out in front? She can see hours of eyeball-and-mirror time there.

She says, and it does come out a *tad* bitchy, "What the hell you mean: how have I been? I like freezing on the corner so much I was coming in my jeans till you got here and ruined it?"

He sneers, shakes his head. "Don't start, don't start."

"So *get* here by dawn—is it too much to ask?"

"I'm here. We got all night. I'm here. Cut it with cream, will you?"

The totally dumb thing is: she's glad. It's warm in the car. Under the jacket her nipples are still ice but the heat blowing on her gets what little blood she has left circulating. She leans back and shuts her eyes to the silver city glare, getting afterimages that make her rub her eyes with her thumbs so that she sees veins, black on white, like negative film or like tree branches she saw against the sky one night in the country, a time when lightning hit.

The veins in her eyes: the running-on-empty veins in her colorblind eyes.

"So where we goin'?" she asks the universe.

"Drive around," he says. "See what staggers out and stands in the road."

She of the spidery cut and hungry colorblindness does have a name. It is Maxine Cantinori and she can't remember much about her family, can't recall most of what came before Vinnie turned her. Turned her—like milk turning.

"Don't dwell," Vinnie would say back in those nights, as if you can *not* be where you are if you just think about it hard enough. "I don't dwell," she used to say. "You *do* dwell," he'd argue. "I do not *dwell!*" she'd insist and Vin the Great would shrug and say, "You dwell."

So Maxi stopped dwelling and forgot most everything. Got good at going blank. Could watch TV for years: all those people who enter rooms as if they've never done it before, who stop as if thinking: *Did I get it right that time?* then go on to *cross* the room in this amazingly careful way that says: *Everyone on Earth is watching me cross this room!* but they have to be so cool about it.

Or they drive. People on TV drive everywhere. That part she understands. Where she lives is so spread out it's connected to itself in long stone strips whose names she used to know but she can't read as well since she turned. Use it or lose it, they say on TV, like the babes and bulges on the exercise shows who wear stuff that looks more like some kind of paint; whenever you see them they're taking a step then backing down to take it again, and they'll just keep doing that forever, because

when you surf in next day there they are, still taking that step.

"You know how long it's been since?"

"Since what?" asks Vin, because he's not only perfected not listening, he's working on not even thinking. He's not at all like the ones on TV, who have all these serious, like, problems with, like, being turned and it's just so huge that it, like, gets to them? Then Buffy puts them out of their misery. And it must be real human misery, because you can see that all they want to do is lick Buffy like she's candy. They're all actors anyway, or so Maxi understands.

She turns to him, grinning. "Since."

Big Vinnie turns his big dumb doggy grin toward Maxi and shows her the gleaming white tines of his fork. And, just for a second, he looks like Travolta in the one with that girl who kills people without even touching them? She's seen all his movies. Travolta's so handsome she could have a heart attack. She can't remember all the titles but one of them was out west, modern west. It was one of those that came when he was in a creative slump and wasn't even the star, some kid was. Shot in this antique golden light, she remembers.

She doesn't know where that movie took place or even much about it but she wanted to go there. It was always sunset there, how they shot it, the fences and barns and people in silhouette against the golden darkening sky. It was shot in some place that started with K, like Kansas or Kanada, but Maxi likes to think that maybe it was shot in Kolorado. That was out west.

Like where she gets her hair done—it's a weird segue but Pablo's is where she gets her hair done? Pablo is small, brassy-tan with big eyes so dark blue they verge on purple. Maxi thinks he's had beard shadow since he was ten. His voice broke the same year his rattle did.

But Pablo—he's from Kolorado.

Pablo talks lightning Spanish when he's mad but kids around in English while he's working on her. "Satan is *een* me." Grinning, shaping her damp hair with scissors. "All humans *muss* die." Pablo has writhing Hellscene tats on his biceps, full of skulls and bat wings and alien-dick stuff like she's seen in Giger's coffeetable books. But a really sweet guy. And he's told her about this place called Greely: "Where dey put you een de bean mill, man. I hate dat place. Make you work long hours, man, sorting dose peento beans." Then he starts dancing to a sound he makes—"Shi-shi-shi"—like the sound dried beans make when you sort them over a screen. He's described it so many times it's like she's been there.

And she wants to go there someday. Kolorado, not this bean mill thing.

In the mean time, she's here, wherever here is, and she's got a cheap-shit room—she split the handle on her broom swatting a cockroach just before she went outside to wait for Himself. Her room has one huge window but she has cardboard over that. And there's a TV, which recently, because of her being so hungry, she's been seeing only in black and white, the way someone told her it used to be all the time and Maxi just has a lot of trouble believing that. What she and Vinnie lift from whoever they slurp pays the rent.

And she's got Vinnie—good ol' Vinnie Bop-a-rino (with flat hands, she slaps out the rhythm on the dash and he goes, "What? What?" like she's hurting the genuine leather interior) and that's when the nickel drops. Vinnie.

*Barbarino.*

Was his name. Was Travolta on that show. Was on when she was a kid. In a town or a city in a house she can't remember anymore.

"Vinnie Kolorado."

Vinnie says, "Huh?"

"*De nada*," she says. What Pablo says sometimes. Means nothing.

"YOU GUYS ARE REALLY COOL, DRIVING ME HOME LIKE THIS."

It feels like years later and Vinnie still has the wheel. (He never lets her drive.) They are out in the country now. The speaker is a tall female of the blond persuasion, big lipsticked lips, big eyes with little black spokes all around them? Name of Thumper or has a lisp and last name is Sumper and calls herself that.

Thumper will do for now. For now won't be long. For now they are going along a country road that winds back toward the bar near the college that attracts girls like Thumper. Her car has broken down and she doesn't have one of those cool phones Maxi envies. But when you're turned, it's kind of hard to just sign up for things like long-distance service and get contracts and stuff. Maxi has seen the movies (she's seen *all* the movies) in which the turned are so rich and cool and bored blank—and they all have phones. All the money in the world? In one of them they had this whole worldwide org run by sharp guys in suits. They had *board* meetings? Maxi thinks: Excuse me?

And Thumper says, "What's funny?" Touching her hair, as if it might be *that* that's funny. Because Maxi's laughing in back. To make room for Thumper, Maxi got in back 'cause Thumper's on the tall side. Needs the leg room.

"Boardrooms, I'm laughing at," Maxi says.

"Why boardrooms?"

"No reason." She squints. "You have a really deep voice."

"So?"

"So you have a deep voice. Are you, like, sensitive about it?"

"No, I'm not, like, sensitive about it. You're the one back there laughing at boardrooms. I'm just sitting here. Sheesh." And looks out her window.

Maxi doesn't buy it right off, keeps warming it over a match flame. What it's like is oil on Thumper's vocal cords, so that all the higher registers are muted but still it's not like Vinnie the Violin when he mocks her in her *her*-voice.

The nickel doesn't drop this time, it just sticks there. Maxi laughs harder, throwing her head all the way back. If Thumper could see in the dark and if she looked she would see the tines of Maxi's fork. But Thumper doesn't look.

"Vinnno, you sure can pick 'em!"

Thumper says, "Your friend is a little weird, you know that?"

"Trip and a half," says Vinnie. "What you say your name was?"

Enunciating carefully, Maxi says, "Thum-per."

"Actually," Thumper says, "I just say Thumper."

Squinting with his whole face, Vinnie asks, "Was that a rabbit?"

Maxi says, "Yeah, and you just missed it, it was movin' so quick."

Thumper shakes her head fast, fingers at her temples. "I just know I'm not following this conversation."

"That's 'cause it *turned*," Maxi says.

Almost smacking Thumper across the face, Vince swings an arm back and points at her. "Hey! What I tell you about that! Did I tell you?"

Maxi sits back and folds her arms. "Yeah, yeah." Slides down so low she's sitting on her back, almost.

Still yelling: "What if I was taking this person home!"

Thumper parks a hand out, palm up. "I thought...you *were* taking me..."

Vinnie says, "No, we're gonna kill you and leave you in the woods." And goes on scolding Maxi: "But what if I *was* taking her home, like I said. And you go," quoting her in that voice: "That's 'cause it *turned*. I mean, you are not smart, Maxi. You are just not bright."

Maxi shapes the words *fuck off*, knowing better than to say them. In front, Thumper is a mannequin, her hand still parked, fingers curling slowly like wax going soft. Black wax, Maxi thinks, her colorblindness forcing her to see the hand as black against the car light spidering through the bare trees ahead.

Thumper says, "I'll just get out here."

"No, it's not far," says Vince.

"Hey...look...please..." Thumper's voice quavers.

"Ah, now—see?" Vince, working his head all around on his neck. It's all Maxi's fault. The trick is always better done if they don't know it's coming. "See? Now she knows."

"Hey..." Thumper says again. And Maxi can't see it but knows Thumper is making those settling gestures with both spread hands. "You don't...want to do this. I'm not—oh, shit." Shaking her head. "I'm not even what you want—I'm not even a girl, okay? I mean, this is just a thing I do, it's just—"

"Oh shut up," says Vince. "Pain in the ass."

"Please—I am *not* lying to you! You're into this thing you're into. That's you're thing. My thing is *this*. It's not the same *thing!*"

Maxi, sitting way low in the back, her legs spread, her hands idle between them, hears the voice waver, then sputter as the mouth warps and stops working right. Maxi sucks one fang, then the other. Her back arches, mouth opens wide. Her eyes roll up white in the pits. Up front, they are still going at it—the chump begging Vinnie and blaming God in sentences that chop each other down, and Vinnie going, "Shut up! Shut up!" like a tape loop—but Maxi knows that Thumper is almost ready to jump from the moving car, almost scared enough to throw herself at the flying wall and hit it at sixty, believing that, like someone in a movie, she'll roll a few times and get up and run, while knowing that, in this particular work of the higher cinema, she will crack like a branch and fold like a sleeve around one of those perforated steel posts that hold speed-limit signs.

And Maxi doesn't feel like road kill tonight.

Like a striking cobra, she yanks back the head, lances down with one hand to trap Thumper's right arm, and bares the golden throat. Blond hair like a dead animal spills into the back. Thumper has short dark hair and smells as if he put on air freshener. The tines of Maxi's fork make the two little *tup-tup* sounds of puncture. She's in already and Thumper is still realizing, still getting there, just now acknowledging that a major artery he wouldn't know from eight inches of garden hose has a couple holes in it.

Holding Thumper's chin, Maxi opens wide and rat-shakes her bite down onto the yelling neck, sealing her wet lips tight to the skin for better suction, and starts to draw, more like breathing in really deep than drinking. Thumper's not even yelling suddenly, just kicking, trying to break loose. But Vince has the other arm pinned. He's laughing and barking: "Yeah, *that's* the stuff!" Maxi glances up and she can see him—

the dark chocolate hair, the sickly greenish skin, soon to blush rose with health. The golden shine in his eyes, the midnight-blue of the steering wheel reflecting amber houselights passing in the distance. Way up, the small red lights of a silent jet, winking code. Red code. Color red.

THE STARS HAVE COLORS TOO—CREAMY YELLOW AND BURNT ORANGE AND HOT blue, on a sky the darkest possible shade of green before black. So that Maxi, standing in a wide rolling cornfield cut down to stubble, arms thrown out, head thrown back, imagines outer space as a thick luscious Jello in which these intense points of color are suspended. Bright little stars of fruit essence. Sweet.

But everything has substance now. Cold air feels watery thick. Crusty earth crunches underfoot, sends up scented powders of boulder and bark. On the sharp country air a tangy scent, like a box of new nails from the hardware store—the iron scent of blood.

Best of all, Maxi has substance now, feels hugged by her jeans, almost fat in them, her butt filled out and rounded, thighs powerful and sturdy, breasts and biceps pumped. Even her hair feels thicker.

Grinning like a kid on speed and garbage-acid, she turns toward the car. In a fluid, throaty voice she says, “Vincenzo! What, you still licking your fingers?”

Even by starlight it takes her a moment to read the scene. Front passenger door of the Town Car thrown wide. Thumper, white as wax, spilled out like an inverted Jesus except he has a black bra on and a thing like a sock erupting from one cup. That’s because Vinnie has the guy’s legs doubled-up onto his chest and he’s pumping them so slowly and seriously that Maxi’s almost sure that Vince is getting necro. On the other hand, she figures Vince *is* necro so maybe this is okay but still it strikes her as a tad beneath cool. She vaguely feels sorry for Thumper, giving his life like a chicken to feed people, but that’s life or death or whatever.

Getting closer though, she sees that it’s not what she thought. Just what it is, she’s not sure. Vince has the guy’s legs up against his chest and he’s using both hands like a circular squeegee, first on one leg then on the other, to work what’s left in the plumbing down into the big body pipes. Then doubles-up the legs and pumps. Maxi understands when the twin spent oil wells on the slack neck yield and Vinnie dives in, drawing hard through his fangs.

The whole thing strikes her as sad. And she had been feeling really good.

“Vin,” she says, “come on, it’s over. Let’s go.”

She hears this twisty sucky sound as he slurps off and looks at her, gore

streaming like Hershey's syrup on the chin of a messy four-year-old, and says:

"Bullshit! He's a big bloody bitch! Now get over here and help!"

And bites in for more.

She just stands there feeling that everything that's happened to her since Vinnie turned her is happening now and this is it. This is forever. This.

And realizes that she is dwelling.

But not in Kolorado.

She goes over to help but there isn't much left and Vinnie smacks her for taking so much in the first place.

"You greedy pig!" he shouts. Glaring.

As if he had had some actual right to one drop of Thumper's blood in the first place.

SO SHE'S STILL FEELING FINE AND FULL BUT A LITTLE DOWN AS THEY DRIVE. Nowhere. Just around. She'd like to hit a movie, anything, it's the only time she gets to see daylight anymore. But Vinno doesn't *feel* like it so that's the end of that.

"Then let's go to your place," she says. She's never been.

Even the obvious outcome waving at him from behind the suggestion has no effect. He's still sulking. Vinnie can really pull a sulk so that's what he's doing—and not even turning on the radio. She's afraid to do it herself.

She lets her head back against the seat and shuts her eyes, one arm on the frame of the rolled-down window. The other arm could guide its hand across the cushioned divide between the front seats and find one of his, or his thigh, but does not. Or, while starting to do that, decides not to and instead feels back between and behind the seats and touches some sort of fur. Maxi's touch flinches from it as though a small animal that bites had gotten into the car while Vincenzo was milking his cow. Then she remembers Thumper's wig that fell off.

She pulls it up and looks at it, flops it over and looks into it, having never seen a wig before, and it's like the stitching inside a baseball cap but there's more of it, going more different ways. She flips it over again, onto her fist, puppets her thumb and two fingers out through the bangs and right then gets an old echo of a name—York or Yory or something—and it pulls her into a memory-chainlink of being somewhere on a sunny afternoon with a lot of other people and having the feeling that they were waiting for her to do something, or make up her mind. Leading to a flavor of ham and then potato salad, tactile sensations of wind and



a smell of saltwater, a distant reek of something rotten, maybe fish. She almost has it, where that was and, more importantly, when—

—when Vinnie rips the wig from her hand and sneers at it.

“Fuck is this?”

Maxi grabs at it but he goes, “Hey!” and holds it out of reach.

She says, “It’s Thumper’s wig, okay?” And reaches again.

“Fffffuck....” Vinnie powers down the window and chucks it.

She just looks at him and now he’s driving with this little purse-lipped smile of knowing he’s a bastard while his eyes appear to squint at the road as if he really has to concentrate on what he’s doing and she says:

“You’re really an asshole sometimes, you know?” and he says:

“I know. Let’s go to your place.”

“Fuck you.” Folds her arms in tight.

“Basic idea,” says Vinnie.

“That one’s *never* been funny.”

He shrugs. “Only human.”

“Only sort of.”

He says, “We’ll go to your place.”

And she knows that they will, partly because they always have. But now, without needing any more, she knows why.

Looks at him. “You don’t even have a place, do you?”

Vinnie concentrates on his driving. They plow back into a city of bleeding pinks, electrocution yellows, thermonuclear blues.

“You don’t,” she says, sure of it now. “You just park this thing in a garage somewhere and get in the trunk. Till it’s time for you to get out again.”

She watches him but Vincent is busy being magnanimous, allowing poor young thing her rant, content that she will run down, sulk then let him sleep at the Y, like always. She says nothing, lets the lightshow bomb her eyes with colors so intense that one more watt will melt and run them into the street. A wailing ambulance overtakes them. Shooting red and white lightning, it cuts the traffic with the siren shrieks and techno stutters of its horn, making way for the dying, the already dead.

Missed my ride, Maxi thinks.

Vinnie hears her laugh and figures he’s forgiven. Starts telling a story:

“I know why you’re dwelling. Happens to me sometimes. It’s ‘cause of the way you forget stuff. Mom and Dad? Where you grew up? First fuck? When you turn, you turn away. And that’s the truth, Maxi. You turn away. Turn your back on all the crap that used to pile up.”

He flips the turn-signal arm and pours the Town Car through a right, lets the wheel spin back and stops it with his fingertips. The lights strung

ahead burn Irish green as far as she can see between canyon walls of brownstone facade, stone steps black with age and garbage cans fluted like chunks of Roman column. Her old neighborhood? Maxi wonders—this is not Vince's usual way back to her place. Some of that crap that used to pile up haunts the hidden cellar she packed it into years ago: how many, she can't say. And again there is bright sunshine, a stickball game this time and warm soft pretzels you hold in both hands. All of it lost except to occasional summonings like these and, in time, with enough blood siphoned in and gone rust, not even these, no memories at all, no past, no Maxi Cantinori, not so much as a footprint.

Just a glimpse in a mirror and some garlic nailed up—and *he* thinks it's a good idea.

They park, go inside.

Her place. Ought to be demolished, burned, scatter the ashes. Must be three in the morning. She unlocks, unlocks, hits the one that jams, unlocks the door. First thing, Vinnie trips on the broom she broke swatting that roach. He splits it all the way. She hears the brushy fall of one half, the hollow woody roll of the other till it clunks against one of the feet that her bed stands on.

She locks up and, before she's done, he's already on the bed, stripped, stiff, hands locked behind his head (he has commandeered the pillow) to wait, as if now it's time for her to pay him back for all the gas he burned tonight.

Her foot kicks the half of the broomstick that rolled. She stops, looks down at it. The way it split left it with a clean blond sharpness of fresh wood. Reminds her of Thumper's wig. And how mad she was when he threw it out the window.

Picks it up. About two and a half feet.

Holds it two-handed, like the samurai in movies, turns, axles on one heel, silent, beautifully poised, imagining that she is Japanese, called Maxi Kolorado, ghost princess who comes to men at the hour of their death. She turns again, not quite brushing the bed with one leg as she takes the broomstick stub through a smoothly hushed arc that hurls the balanced force of her weight toward the split blond point that seeks his heart and pins him to the mattress.

And lifts her hands away from the wood, as if to say: Wasn't me!

Eyes shut. Trembling. Breath jumping in her chest.

Hears him grunt, as if trying to digest what she has shoved through him, and peeks down to see a dark pool spread slowly under him. Her mattress drinks.

She doesn't hurry, though his eyes watch her as she finds his keys and

the money from Thumper's purse and adds it to her own. She packs a bag with what is worth taking (there isn't much) and notes the time. Just a little after three. She wonders if he might somehow free himself, somehow heal, come after. Looks at her big window, covered with cardboard, WHIRLPOOL and THIS END UP block-lettered like the words on a headstone. She goes over and rips it all down.

He groans, watching the window in horror.

Now Vinnie has his own place, and Maxi has a car. She tosses her bag in and creeps into traffic. Nothing has changed. She is still what Vinnie made her. But she doesn't feel stuck with it anymore: eating the same sticky red candy, over and over. She will still have to do that but now she will own it. And she will dwell as she pleases. Where she pleases. She puts on the heater. Feels the chronic tension in her shoulders ease. Figures out which way west is (opposite where the first blue hint of morning hangs) and heads that way. •

### **in upcoming issues...**

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by DAVID YEH, KAREN TRAVISS, SUSAN URBANEK LINVILLE, ARI GOLEMAN, KATE REIDEL, KEN RAND, JOHN PARK, WES SMIDERLE, KEVIN COCKLE, GARY ARCHAMBAULT, DANIEL KSENYCH, JANCIS ANDREWS, PATRICIA RUTALE, STEVEN MILLS, STEVEN MOHAN, MARC BRUTSCHY, TERRY HAYMAN, JEAN-CLAUDE DUNYACH, MICHAEL DEWEY, HARVEY WALKER, MELISSA HARDY, PATRICIA DISCHNER, E.L. CHEN, HOLLY PHILLIPS, LESLIE BROWN, STEVE MOHN, LEAH BOBET, and many more!

## about our contributors

BARTH ANDERSON's first published short story, "Landlocked" (*Talebones* #18), received an Honorable Mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. His fiction has also appeared in *New Genre* #2 and *Isaac Asimov's SF*, and he belongs to two vermin-influenced writers groups, Ratbastards and Karma Weasels. Barth is currently working on a medical sf novel set in future Mexico.

RANDY D. ASHBURN is an administrative law judge for workers' compensation claims in the Appalachian region of southeastern Ohio, where he lives with his wife and two sons. He spent five years prior to that representing death row inmates in their appeals. Though he's only been writing fiction for a couple of years, he's already sold stories to a number of pro magazines and anthologies, including John Pelan's *The Darker Side*. He's also done well in several competitions, including multiple top ten finishes in back-to-back *Writer's Digest* annual short story contests against as many as 19,000 other entrants.

S.A. BOLICH is a former U.S. Army intelligence officer who finally gave in to the life-long compulsion to write. She says, "I

do not remember a time when I did not shape stories in my head, and won my first writing contest at the age of eleven. I have published travel and equestrian-related articles based on a lifetime's experience with horses and extensive travel in Europe, Canada, the Caribbean, and the United States, including the rugged back country of Washington State. I am fascinated by history, horses, myths and legends, and the outdoors, not necessarily in that order. I am currently researching a non-fiction book on the care and usage of horses through history, aided by my long-suffering Saddlebred steed, Beau."

JEFF DE BOER was born in Calgary, Alberta. Being the son of a professional tin smith, Jeff grew up exposed to the endless possibilities of metal. In high school, he built his first suit of armor, and shortly after, learned techniques from a blacksmith. In 1984, he enrolled at the Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD), where he majored in jewelry design. In the fall of 1986, while a student at ACAD, he combined his new skills in jewelry construction with his knowledge of armor-making to produce the world's first and only suit of armor for a mouse. Jeff graduated from ACAD in 1988, and in 1994, he opened a

solo exhibition of some 140 works, accompanied by a fantastic full-color book about the work, *Articulation*. Jeff has gone back to ACAD, this time as an instructor teaching Jewelry Design and Presentation. Recently, he moved into a new studio in south-east Calgary, where he works with his wife Debbie and two full-time assistants.

HARRY JAMES CONNOLLY lives in Seattle, Washington, where he works under threat of imminent layoff at a large daily newspaper, and lives with the joys of imminent fatherhood. His only other fiction sale to date can be found in the second issue of *Black Gate* magazine.

JEAN-CLAUDE DUNYACH, born in 1957, has a PhD in applied mathematics and supercomputing. He works for Airbus in Toulouse (south of France). He has been writing science fiction since the early 1980s, and has already published seven novels and four collections of short stories. His latest novel, *Etoiles Mourantes* (*Dying Stars*), written in collaboration with the famous French writer Ayerhdal, won the *Grand Prix de la Tour Eiffel* in 1999 as well as the *Prix Ozone*. He also writes lyrics for several French singers, which served as an inspiration for one of his novels about a rock and roll singer touring in Antarctica with a zombie philharmonic orchestra...

During the long summer evenings, CHARLES COLEMAN FINLAY lazes around the raspberry bushes out back, getting red stains on his fingers and thinking up new stories. He may also be found in the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (where his alternate history, "We Come Not to Praise Washington," appears in the August issue and his novella, "A Democracy of Trolls," is upcoming in Oct./Nov) as well as *On Spec*.

ANN MARSTON has been owned by cats and airplanes most of her life. She has written six fantasy novels, *Kingmaker's Sword*, *The Western King*, *Broken Blade*, *Cloudbearer's Shadow*, *King of Shadows*, and *Sword and Shadow*, all published by HarperCollins Publishers. Her short fiction has appeared in anthologies such as *Return of the Dinosaurs* and *Zodiac Fantastic*. This is her first appearance in *On Spec*.

STEVE MOHN lives in Montreal. His stories have appeared severally in *On Spec*, while his essays have harangued readers there and in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. A new story will appear in *The Third Alternative*. He has been seen chasing agents with a book manuscript in both hands. Authorities consider him harmless. What do they know!

HOLLY PHILLIPS lives and writes in the mountains of south-central British Columbia. She is trying hard not to let her name's appearance on the masthead go to her head, and hastily assures *On Spec* readers that she submitted "The New Ecology" long before she was invited to join the editorial collective.

GORDON SNYDER lives and works in Burnaby, B.C. He produces paintings and drawings using an "all pencil," which draws onto the wet surface of printmaking paper, and finishes the work using acrylic washes when the drawing is dry. An independent curator and consultant, Snyder is an authority on Western Canadian art and has owned and operated galleries and consulting firms in Canada since the late seventies. His artwork and his philosophy of life reflect the folly and the contradictory nature of the human condition. •



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